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● ON THE TRAIL ●



MOST frontier killings received but slight punishment, as they had the elements of a fair duel rather than a murder. But about 1884 the law enforcement officers of Phoenix, Arizona, found themselves with two men guilty of the most sadistic kind of murder and they were sentenced to be hanged.

As there were no professional hangmen for miles around the sheriff had to do the job. He tied two ropes to a cottonwood tree and had the condemned men stand on wagons underneath. The noose was placed around the first man's neck and the wagon was pulled away by a team of horses. Due to the sheriff's inexperience the rope was too slack and the fall, instead of snapping the killer's neck, strangled him to death.

When the second killer's turn came, he leaped as high as he could as the horses received the whip lash. He came down hard, and his neck broke cleanly—death was mercifully sudden.

There was a long pause and then someone drawled, "Why, the murderin' varmint! He must have been hung before. He knew just how to do it."

ACCORDING to some of the early writers of the West the original Oregonian settlers cut down scores of the giant sequoia trees to make homes for themselves. One writer asserts that out of the lumber of two of these trees an entire community of twenty-seven houses and four stores serving a population of one hundred and fifty-six people was built. In another instance a single tree is supposed to have furnished the materials for nine houses, a livery stable, a two-storey hotel, a general store, and a shed.

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By
T. T.
FLYNN

Whitey Bill plunged out
of the bank. "You double-
crossing skunk," he bel-
lowed.

RIDE THE BLOOD TRAIL



"Somewhere, mister, the longest trail runs straight and narrow . . . and where yours crosses mine—one of us must die!"

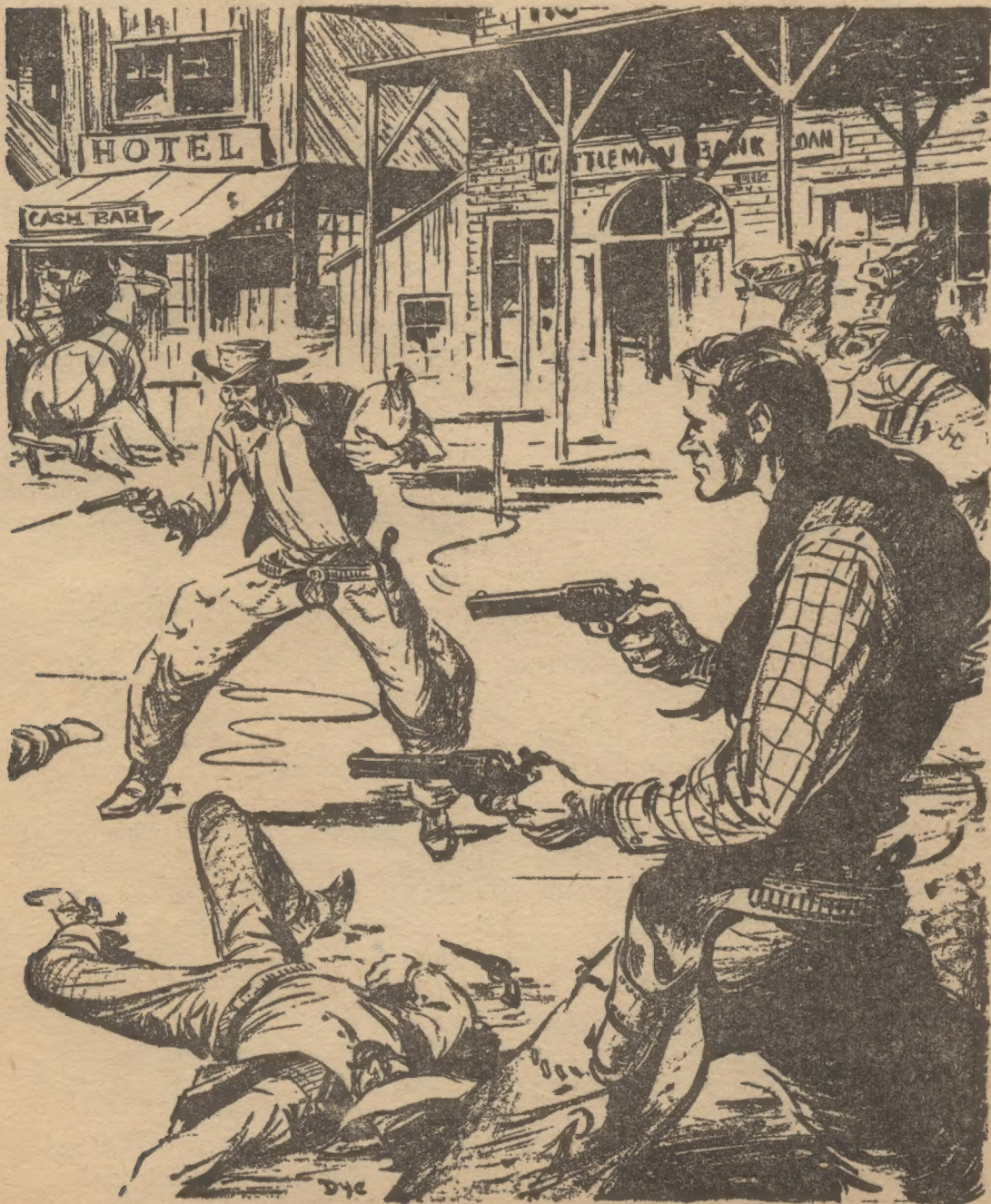
CHAPTER ONE

Death at Dawn

THE screaming voice was thin and far off, with terror which caught at Dave Garrison's usually cool nerves. Garrison heard it at dawn when

he rode up out of the great rock-walled slash of Ghost Canyon.

He had meant to roll a cigarette and rest the dun horse. Instead he stood sharply in the stirrups, testing the brightening dawn, a close-knit, flat-flanked



young man with black hair. He came back hard to the saddle and brought the rein ends whistling down. The dun horse exploded into the gallop which had made other men swear with admiring envy.

The way was littered with stunted bushes, scanty grass clumps and lush cactus thrusting among weathered rock outcrops. The dun raced sure-footed through the rough going. It burst over another rise, and a screaming slug going past Garrison's shoulder came from the long down-pitch of rocky ground studded with heavy cactus growth.

The gunman was scrambling on a gray horse, rifle in hand. One horse. One man, who had been determined to kill on sight.

Garrison had yanked his hand gun and the spur-raked dun hurtled on down the rough slope. The mounted figure ahead whirled the gray horse and fired a rifle shot at the ground. He levered furiously and drove more lead screaming past Garrison's elbow.

Only then, as the dun rushed close, did Garrison open fire. Something in the reckless fury of his approach seemed to unnerve the gunman. He yanked the gray horse toward cover of a jagged rock outcrop.

Garrison emptied his hand gun in a fast, calculated burst and as the spurring stranger vanished behind the rocks, Garrison pulled his saddle gun without slackening speed. A rush to close quarters was as safe as hunting cover now. Others might be near to help the stranger.

Then of a sudden everything changed. The stranger's veering horse came into view again. The rider was off the saddle and a foot caught in a stirrup. The plunging, bucking gray horse was bolting away, dragging the man bouncing and slamming head down over the rocky ground.

He might have been dead as he left the saddle. Garrison never knew. In that instant he ceased to care as the rushing

dun passed the spot where the stranger had been standing.

Garrison brought the dun up sliding, rearing, snorting its own awareness of terror in the dawn.

Garrison hit the ground running. His insides were gathering, knotting. . . .

The first shafts of sunrise brushed gold on the tall spiked cactus near earthen mounds the big red ants had built. Mounds above a man's knee, broad and teeming. And the ants had not waited for the golden sun. They clotted on top of the largest mound in a monstrous seething mass. And the mass heaved slowly and screamed thinly. . . .

Garrison snapped open a spring-blade knife and ran in at stake ropes which spread-eagled arms and legs covered and clotted with the mass of living red.

He had to step on the red carpet to reach all four ropes. Live fire spilled down inside his boots. It flowed up his wrist as he grabbed an ankle and heaved back.

He dragged the thing and all its monstrous seething red cocoon out over the clean bare ground. He flopped it over and over, using both hands now, and dragged it farther away. He snatched off his stained old black hat and beat at it savagely.

He looked at what his beating sombrero had uncovered and a retching came up in his throat.

He dragged it on away from the big ants he had knocked off. Then, a little wild himself with a kind of sweeping horror, Garrison yanked off coat, shirt, boots, and slapped and brushed and cleared his own body of the vicious fire-bites.

The screaming had died away. The gunman had shot from the saddle to kill this thing that had once been a man. Perhaps so it couldn't talk.

Garrison looked long and hard as he reloaded his handgun. He sucked a shak-

ing breath. His face was stony. All this was beyond pity or hesitation. For what had been a man with eyes and clean whole face still jerked spasmodically, still lived a little.

A last booming shot rolled away through the dawn. Garrison hauled his clothes back on.

The dawn quiet had a brooding weight. Garrison carried the body to a big flat rock and then rode after the gray horse.

He found the body a good mile away, where it had finally twisted free of the stirrup. The horse, reins over saddle horn, had kept on running.

Garrison knelt by the battered corpse. It was an American. The victim on the ant hill had been Mexican.

Pockets held no identification. In a heavy canvas money belt were seven double eagles.

Garrison left the stranger there without regret and put the dun horse into a long run west across the dry and broken mesa. A full hour later he came without warning to an abrupt rimrock drop, and pulled up for the quick surge of pleasure he always had at this point.

Far below the rimrock in a narrow green little valley the red-tiled roof of John Farrow's big house splotched color beside the clear shallows of a small stream.

John Farrow had built in hacienda style around a spacious, flower-filled patio. Trees lifted between the green of irrigated gardens. Beyond the big house were a few smaller, drab outbuildings.

Garrison sat frozen and his glance went brittle and cold. A dead horse lay near the empty horse corral. In the carriage-way in front of the big house a man sprawled motionless, face down, arms flung out. . . .

And then another man walked slowly out of the patio entrance, reeling a little. He halted and drank from a bottle, and reeled on a few steps and sat heavily on a blue wooden bench, and drank again.

Garrison knew that bench well. All his life he would remember that bench, and not holding a man who swilled liquor in a dawn of death.

Something snapped inside. Garrison cried thickly at the dun horse and raked spurs, and rode the fine animal dangerously in a wild rush down the trail into the valley.

THE man hunched on the blue bench with his bottle while the flaring-nostriled rush of the dun pulled up rearing. His look was dull, indifferent as Garrison caught him by a shoulder, shaking him in a kind of wild fury.

The shabby little man was not armed. He showed no resentment as Garrison dragged him upright, raging, "Talk, damn you!"

Uncut iron-gray hair fell over the man's eyes as Garrison shook him. Dully he said, "I didn't kill no one. I'm Jimmy Green, headin' for the railroad. Stopped here last night."

Garrison released the shoulder. "Green? Where from?"

"San Carlos mine," said Green. He mouthed each fuzzy word carefully. He was, Garrison saw, glassy-eyed drunk, in the way of a man never sober.

"Sam Meredith's drunken bookkeeper?"

Green nodded owlshly.

"The books always balanced," he said huskily. He licked his lips. "Drunk las' night—an' it won't balance." He shivered and lifted the bottle with a convulsive movement.

Garrison hurled the bottle into the shrubbery behind the bench. "Where's John Farrow?"

Jimmy Green jerked an unsteady thumb at the tall carved wooden gates open at the patio entrance. "Big room to the right. No use runnin'."

But Garrison was running. . . .

The large parlor to the right was a big

dim room with carved ebony and mahogany furniture. John Farrow was there, hanging head down by roped ankles hauled up to the center of the heavy wrought-iron chandelier with its circle of glass-bowled lamps.

The room was a shambles. Broken glasses, empty bottles, cigarette and cigar ends on rugs and smooth waxed floor.

Farrow's wrist was cold. Garrison swung back to the flowers and greenery of the patio. Jimmy Green waited there on uncertain legs. He saw the wild look Garrison cast around. Pity entered the little man's glassy look.

"Third room back, mister. But I wouldn't go in there."

Garrison bolted toward the room. He leaned the carbine beside the doorway and slowly walked inside. . . .

Jimmy Green was on a patio bench drinking from another bottle when Garrison emerged with heavy steps and ignored the proffered bottle.

Jimmy Green whispered creakily. "There's more of them back at the servant's houses. Wasn't no one left to talk." He gulped. "A bottle don'-help."

Garrison said wonderingly. "She was to have been married next month! To a good man. I rode all night to tell her I was happy—even if it had to be someone else."

Garrison wheeled on the gray-faced little drunk. His violent question was raw with threat. "Who did it?"

"I ain't been sober in years, mister. I was drunk last night. Thought it was a dream."

"All this a dream?" said Garrison savagely.

"I've dreamed worse," the little man mumbled. "Snakes at my face. Things you never seen on earth laughin' an' screaming in the dark. I was dead drunk in the bushes behind that bench last night. I thought it was just another dream till I crawled out this morning."

"What did you dream?"

Jimmy Green shivered at the memory. "When I seen what had happened an' got part of a bottle down, some of it come back. There was shots an' yells. There was a voice I thought I knew speaking by that blue bench. 'This'n almost got away, you fools! Get 'em all.'"

Garrison said explosively, "You knew his voice!"

"Thought I did. A thousand strangers come by the San Carlos mine. Must'a been one of them. I don' know which one."

"Think, damn you!"

"I been thinkin'. It's like a hot coal in my head! I'll never forget that voice. But I dunno."

"You'll remember the voice?" Garrison pressed.

"Kind of sneering, it was, like it hadn't no use for anyone. I'll know it if I ever hear it again."

Garrison reached for the bottle. It was fiery Indies rum, double-distilled. John Farrow had been a retired sea captain. He had shipped rum in by the case. The liquor tore at Garrison's throat and burned deep inside, showing why Jimmy Green had been dead drunk last night on it.

"We'll look around!" said Garrison, choking a little.

John Farrow had been a strange man in a way, a watchful, moody man of little talk. Years ago he'd found this lonely little valley under the rimrock and had settled here.

Farrow had run no cattle, kept no crew of riders. A few Mexicans did what was needed around the place. Here, two years ago, a niece, Marcia Ames, had come to visit, and had stayed, bringing a new and needed youth and gayety.

More than friendship for Marcia had built in Garrison. Before he'd said so, Marcia had written she was engaged to marry another man. This day Garrison buried her outside the big house, under

the tall trees, near the murmuring little creek; and John Farrow and the others beside her.

Jimmy Green sweated too with pick and shovel. When it was over and the day was running out, Garrison said curtly, "I'll get you a horse. We're riding."

It was a long day's ride to Big Hat Store, a second day's ride to Napa and the sheriff. They rode all night to the small cluster of adobe huts and one larger building that was Big Hat Store.

Lindiger, the bulky, stolid Dutchman who owned the store, stumped out on his peg-leg in the dawn as Garrison all but lifted Jimmy Green from the saddle and led him by an arm, reeling, to a box against the store front.

An hour later, fed, washed, shaved, gaunt and red-eyed, Garrison climbed on a lean chestnut horse, the best the Dutchman had.

"Remember, no whiskey for Green. Not a drink," Garrison said as he gathered the reins.

"Dot kills him maybe—but I do it," promised Lindiger, and he would. The Dutchman was a stubborn man.

Two hours of daylight were left and Ike Fanning, the Napa sheriff, was still at the courthouse, when Garrison walked in on stiff legs.

Fanning took one look and came out of his chair. "Man, you look half-dead!"

"WE BURIED them," Garrison finished heavily. "The one on the ant hill was Pablo Montoya, houseman for Farrow."

Fanning was a thin, rawhide sort of man, a good sheriff and not one to back away from trouble. Some of the rock hardness, the eating grimness driving Garrison had entered the sheriff as he listened.

"Why the ant hill, so far from the house?" he wondered aloud.

"The bunch rode that way. Looks like

they kept on in a hurry and left one man to watch Pablo on the ant hill. Perhaps to hear what Pablo said if he broke down and talked before he died. The fellow tried to kill him when I showed up. Tried to make sure he'd never talk, I guess."

Fanning nodded. "What do you know about John Farrow?"

"Not much. Three years ago I took over his Ventana mine on shares. Farrow never came near the mine."

"Knew his niece pretty well, didn't you?" asked Fanning shrewdly, showing he kept in touch with gossip in his district.

"We were friends," said Garrison shortly.

"She ever talk about the years her uncle went to sea?"

"No. She never saw Farrow until two years ago. She'd written him that her mother, Farrow's sister, had died. Took almost a year to get a reply. Farrow sent money. Asked her to come on from New Orleans and visit him. He was all the family she had left. She went. I think Farrow was lonesome. Anyway, he asked Marcia to stay on and she did."

Fanning rolled a cigarette thoughtfully. Garrison built a smoke too. His hands were unsteady. "Starting a posse to-night?" he questioned tightly.

"No hurry," Fanning murmured. "The trail will be days old." He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and burrowed among old envelopes and papers. He straightened with a long soiled envelope which held one folded paper. He opened the paper carefully on the desk and said mildly, "Five or six years ago I stopped in to see my old friend Alec Bart, sheriff at White Canyon, up in the Green River country. I found this in a stack of old reward dodgers back in Alec's desk."

Garrison looked down at an old yellowed reward notice. A corner had been torn off. The paper was brittle with age.

"Five hundred reward," he read aloud.

"The Rawhide Kid, murder, bank robbery, holdup of two Union Pacific trains. Age about twenty-eight, height about five-seven. Black beard. Little finger missing from left hand. Scar at corner of left eye. . . ."

Garrison's voice trailed off in a slow breath. His gaze swung to Fanning's level estimation.

Fanning said, "Alec Bart guessed the dodger was put out near twenty years back. As far as Alec knew, the Rawhide Kid wasn't seen afterwards."

Fanning put the dodger in the envelope. He was calm.

"John Farrow had built his place. Wasn't any rustling or law-breaking out that way. I dropped by for a good look at his eye scar and missing little finger, and thanked him for his grub and rode away. There's more to making a good sheriff than hunting any kind of a reason for an arrest."

"The Rawhide Kid!" said Garrison slowly, trying to link that old reward dodger with the gray-haired, silent man he'd known. With Marcia's uncle. With Marcia's family.

Fanning said, "Old Alec Bart said the Rawhide Kid had ridden with as wild a bunch of young gunnies as the territory up there had ever seen. Red Malloy, Mex Peters, Big Whitey Bell. . . ."

"I've heard of Whitey Bell," said Garrison.

Fanning nodded. "A bad one. Alec said they were a young, kill-crazy bunch. But they faded out. Some were shot or hanged. Mex Peters was seen in South America. Big Whitey Bell got a life sentence for train robbery. Got religion in prison and a pardon." Fanning's grin took a wintry edge. "Big Whitey went to preaching against sin and liquor in tent meetings."

Garrison said, "Don't make sense, the Rawhide Kid ending up a sea captain!"

Fanning closed the desk drawer. "Who

ever heard of a sea captain settling where Farrow did? And with the money he had? No one around here ever saw him on a ship. Farrow told that story and said no more about it. He kept to himself. He had all the money he could use. It's been guessed for years that Farrow had a small treasure hidden out there at his place. Gold money, bullion bars from the two mines he bought."

Garrison hesitated. "Might be a little truth to it. The Ventana mine never made anybody rich. But it made a profit. Farrow took his half in gold money. Had me bring it to him every now and then. Said he didn't like banks."

"Doesn't matter what he had hidden," said Fanning. "If folks thought he had treasure there, it's a reason for the raid on his place."

Fanning had been sheriff a long time. He was a calm, shrewd man. "We'll start in the morning," he decided. "That's soon enough, seeing as you buried everyone."

GARRISON was like a dead man in the hotel bed when Fanning hammered on the door. They were six as they rode toward Big Hat Store. One was the chief deputy, Slack Summers. And there was Yuma Charley, short and broad, with an Indian cast to his features, sandy hair and freckled, sun-reddened face—father a Scotsman, mother part Yaqui, part Mexican.

"I keep a pack outfit at the Dutchman's store," Fanning told Garrison. "Slack Summers and the others can do what's needed at Farrow's place. I'll trail on from there with Yuma Charley. He can follow sign like it was printed."

Garrison was a better man after the night's sleep. A somber hardness had settled on him.

"You and a 'breed tracker going to bring in that bunch?" he asked with irony.

"I want an idea where they're heading."

"Then what?"

"I'll think about it."

"Make me a deputy," urged Garrison abruptly. "Kind of arrest this Jimmy Green as a suspicious witness, and let me take charge of him. I'll put him on the Ventana payroll, so his time won't be wasted."

Fanning's alertness sharpened. "Why should I?"

"Call it a favor."

"I want a reason."

Garrison rode in hard and bitter silence for a moment. "I'm going after them," he said briefly.

"Because of the girl?"

"She was no part of Farrow's past," said Garrison, not aware of the clubbing harshness in his voice. "She'd just made a trip back to Louisiana. Promised to marry a fine young fellow back there. She was back for a last visit with Farrow." Garrison's neck muscles corded as he swallowed hard. "I had to bury her. I've got to write the man who's waiting for her. Then I mean to see grave dirt go on the men who raided that place. She killed herself, but they drove her to it."

Fanning said, "I'll think about it," and rode on ahead to side his chief deputy.

They reached Big Hat before dark. Ike Fanning talked to Jimmy Green alone. Later, as night struck in, Jimmy Green asked Garrison to step outside the store. The little San Carlos bookkeeper was twitching from raw nerves and need of a drink.

"Sheriff says you've got a job that'll keep me out of jail as a witness."

"That's right."

"I got to have a drink now! That damned Dutchman won't open a bottle!"

"No drinks."

"I'll die!"

"If the sheriff locks you up, there won't be any booze. Try to ride away for some

now and I'll help Fanning bring you back," Garrison said bluntly.

Jimmy Green groaned as he turned away.

They made Farrow's place early the next afternoon. The big house was as Garrison had left it, peaceful, quiet. It was the brooding quiet of blasted hopes, of dreams destroyed. The quiet of death.

Fanning spent less than an hour looking around and examining John Farrow's looted desk. Then he rode toward Ghost Canyon with his 'breed tracker. Garrison and Jimmy Green went along. From the high rimrock, Garrison looked back down at the little valley and the blue bench resting empty before the patio entrance.

He'd sat on that bench with Marcia Farrow. He could see the new-spaded dirt where he'd buried her within sight of the bench. His features were stony as he reined on after the others.

CHAPTER TWO

Devil's Hunt

FANNING had a shovel lashed to his pack. They hurriedly buried the two dead men out on the wild mesa. Yuma Charlie, cigarette hanging on his lip, walked about the area in stolid silence.

"I think seven men come this way. Two packhorses," Yuma Charlie decided. "Too much start. Damn long trail ahead."

Shod hoof tracks led them toward Ghost Canyon. In sight of the canyon Yuma Charley hauled up. "Two riders, one packhorse go into canyon." Charlie swung an arm north. "Others that way."

Ike Fanning squinted into the north. "They'll go off the mesa into the salt hills and leave sign at Ox Head Spring. We'll go that way. Good luck, Garrison."

They parted in that casual manner, death behind them, death ahead. Men who had raided John Farrow's place and staked Farrow's man out on an anthill,

wouldn't take chances with anyone who came up with them.

The last sunlight was on the high sky as Garrison took the tortuous down-path into the pooling shadows deep in Ghost Canyon. He saw now where the two riders had turned up the canyon. He led Jimmy Green down the canyon toward the Ventana mine.

Past midnight they reached the mine, dark and quiet now, with no night shift working. Jimmy Green fell on a cot in Garrison's little three-room adobe house close to the mine office. He was twitching, groaning as his whiskey-soaked body demanded liquor. He came up with a groaning cry when Garrison shook him awake in the morning.

Mike Shaughnessy, the mine foreman, was a hard-headed Irishman who broke six feet barefooted. Shaughnessy's deep voice could come soft as a woman's tone or blast in a roar of rage.

This morning Shaughnessy stood disapprovingly in front of the mine office while Garrison tested the pack rope, and Jimmy Green, in new canvas saddle jacket and pants and riding boots, drooped shakily in the saddle.

"I'll say it again, if it costs me my job," said Mike Shaughnessy bluntly. "Stay here where you belong an' work out the devils that are stomping your heart."

"Damn your loose mouth, Mike!" Garrison said softly. "Keep it closed."

"I've said it," Shaughnessy grumbled. His voice took a soft understanding, a little wistful. "When a man rides into the fire, only the good God knows whether he'll be burnt or purified. It's big game you're hunting."

And to the unsteady little bookkeeper, Shaughnessy said, somewhat maliciously, "If you find a whiskey spring, bring it back."

Jimmy Green rode off cursing the big grinning Ventana foreman.

That night they camped far up Ghost

Canyon with the shod tracks pointing on. Jimmy Green cried out wildly now and then in his twitching sleep.

Late next afternoon they followed the tracks out of the canyon on the little-used Black Sheep Mesa trail. And far out on the fantastic, eroded waste of mesa, the shod tracks split. Packhorse and one rider swung off to the left.

Here the two men had dismounted, sat down and drained a bottle of Farrow's fiery rum. The bottle was dry inside. Jimmy Green hurled it against a rock in frantic disappointment.

Garrison was searching for sign. One man had rolled tobacco in brown paper. He left several fat cigarette ends, rolled larger than most men cared to smoke. Garrison picked up two and studied them, and then dropped them and decided:

"We'll follow the packhorse. That one will travel slower."

Nine days later they were on the same trail. Yuma Charlie could not have held the sign better than the somber, fierce persistence which pushed Garrison on day after day.

On rocky stretches where a man could only guess, he circled far out, patiently, until the tracks showed again. He combed each camp-site with fierce persistence which would not be denied.

His knowledge of the man ahead slowly grew. A horse had rolled and left several black hairs.

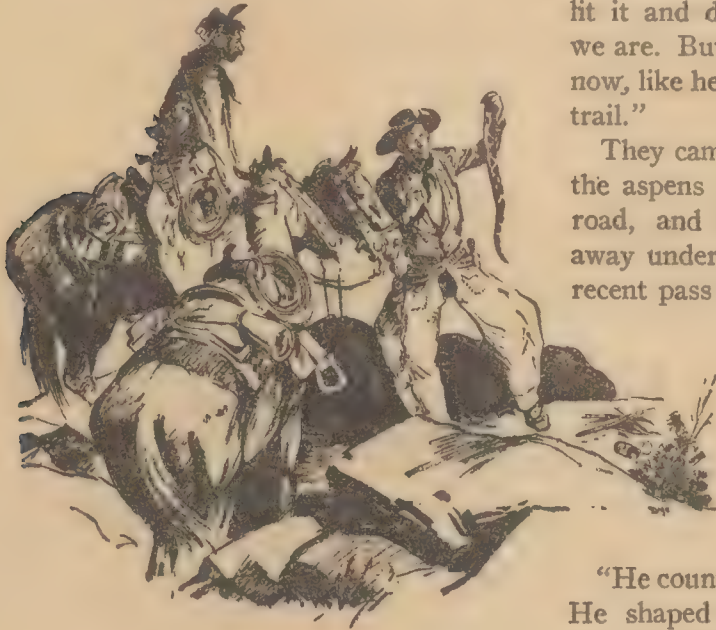
The man had shaved, and tiny clumps of dried soap on the ground held yellow face bristles. The man chewed black twist.

He'd shot a rattler at one camp and left a .44 six-gun shell. He was a tall man by the length of his stride prints. He put his horses on stake-ropes and hobbled them too. Garrison found roan horse-hairs at one picket spot. So the man had a black horse and a roan horse. He had killed other rattlers, and often shot the heads off neatly. He was a dead shot.

More of John Farrow's empty bottles

appeared along the trail. The man liked liquor. He drank as he rode. Some of the bottles had been emptied and tossed away without stopping.

Each time they found a dry bottle Jimmy Green cursed in disappointment. But the little San Carlos bookkeeper was changing. He'd stopped shaking. He began to sleep soundly. Appetite grew. Sun and wind took the gray look off his face. He sat in the saddle straighter and complained less as the whiskey worked out



of his flesh and a new strength crept in.

They crossed the great Sour Water badlands, into country Garrison knew only by hearsay; on into the shale slopes of the Pendero foothills; up into the pines of the higher Penderos, always far from settlements and ranches.

The renegade traveled fast and trail wise. He made halts on the high points, smoking his fat brown paper cigarettes and evidently studying the backtrail patiently for sign of pursuit.

They came off more mountains, down an old sheep-trail, and crossed a deep, narrow canyon on a rickety swing bridge floored with loose, sun-warped planks.

White water tearing at the black rocks far below boomed up at them. The hoof marks of two horses led onto the bridge—and only one horse came off. Garrison pulled up, puzzling it out, studying the growling depths below. Trying to read the stranger's thoughts at this point.

JIMMY GREEN rode back. "Something's wrong?"

"He led his pack-horse on the bridge—and came off the bridge without it," said Garrison. He rolled a smoke and lit it and decided, "I'm not sure where we are. But he is. He wants to ride light now, like he hasn't been packing on a long trail."

They came off the heights, down out of the aspens and pines. Down to a valley road, and the sign vanished, churned away under iron-tired wagon wheels and recent pass of horses and cattle.

His knowledge of the man ahead grew—he shot off rattlers' heads neatly; he was a dead shot. . . .

"He counted on this," Garrison guessed. He shaped another cigarette and murmured, "A tall man with yellow hair, riding a black or a roan horse. Tobacco in his cheek or a fat brown paper cigarette in his face. He likes liquor. He won't pass a saloon. Might buy some .44 shells for his six-shooter."

Jimmy Green said thinly, "Where?"

Garrison said, "Let's find out."

The first little sheep settlement had no word of a tall yellow-haired man. But forty miles down the widening valley at Flat Rock, a bald-headed barber talked above the lather on Garrison's face.

"Long-legged, yellow-haired stranger? One like that was in here for a shave an' a trim. Had a bath, too. Said he was a cattle-buyer from Kansas City."

A fat hotel clerk with pink sleeve-bows and thinning hair remembered the yellow haired man. He'd signed the register as Bud Corrigan. Had put up his black saddle horse at the feed barn around the corner, a tall, taciturn, yellow-haired man with a new-sprouting yellow mustache. Corrigan had a black leather gun-belt, worn riding boots, denim trousers and jacket. He'd drunk whiskey at two bars, turned in early, left Flat Rock at day-break, not saying where he was heading.

"We'll try north," Garrison decided with cold patience. "He's been heading that way."

There was a kind of relentless, terrible patience in the way Garrison followed.

They lost the trail at Flat Rock. Garrison cast out to new roads, new trails. Jimmy Green, saddle-hardened and increasingly resentful, argued, "You aim to keep on like this?"

Garrison nodded somberly. He said, "It's not hurting you," and extended his steady hand. After a moment Jimmy Green did the same. His hand was steady too.

"I know," the little man admitted. "That's why I'm staying with you. I'd have a whiskey bottle at the first bar I hit alone." He rode glumly. "We're death ridin' to meet death," he said. "You know it. We won't get back."

Garrison said, "What difference?"

Jimmy Green let it stand. Neither had bright memories calling back there in the far south.

They rode into a widening valley, into another little town, Talus by name. Just another town, with a run of silver dust on its main street.

The Drover's Palace Hotel was a two-story frame with carpeted stairs and a chipped iron bedstead and well-worn chairs in the front room they took.

The usual assortment of stores flanked the dusty street. The sun had a brassy strike as Garrison started the round of

casual questions about a long-legged, yellow-haired stranger. . . .

It was like casting a hook into unknown pools and always drawing it back empty. But casting, casting. . . . Jimmy Green joined him and they turned in under a sign that said, JASON MCKAY, GENERAL MDSE.

They were the only customers at the moment. The girl who stepped to wait on them was smiling.

"I'd like a handkerchief, please, ma'am," Garrison said, and found himself smiling too. His first real smile of the trip.

She said, "Over here, please." The tap of her heels to a showcase had a lightness of youth and spirit.

She put out neckerchiefs in cotton and silk, in red, blue, black. Her small hands were deft. Interest lighted her sun-dusted face. She had tawny hair that needed the wind in it, Garrison thought. He said, "Hard to make a choice," and waited expectantly for her light chuckle.

It came, and she suggested, "Why not buy one of each kind?"

Garrison chuckled too, whole-heartedly, and missed the astonished lift of Jimmy Green's sun-bleached eyebrows. She might be twenty, Garrison guessed, a slim and generous-mouthed girl who gave him a lift of spirits he'd forgotten.

Beyond a line of washtubs hanging from a wire-suspended board, other voices sounded in a back storeroom. One louder, sneeringly impatient. "For fifty dollars less, I could have my pick of better horses anywhere in town!"

Jimmy Green's sunburned hand on the showcase closed convulsively. Garrison forgot handkerchiefs and the girl as he saw Jimmy Green standing taut and fearful. The little man's head jerked in assent that changed Garrison to a coldly functioning instrument.

Garrison said, "I'll take a blue one, ma'am." And to Jimmy Green, "You'd

better tend to that business back at the hotel."

Jimmy Green almost scurried to the door.

THE girl was puzzled as she wrapped the handkerchief. She looked after Jimmy Green. Her blue eyes rested on Garrison's chiseled face. He tried to bring back the smiling moment.

"Sounds like a sharp horse trade back there, ma'am."

"Dad won't be out-traded," she remarked confidentially. "He's not too anxious to sell, Mase Bragdon just happened to bring the man in."

"And who is Mase Bragdon?"

She said, "You're a stranger, too, aren't you? Mase is the sheriff's son. Tom Bragdon's son."

"And the stranger?"

"I don't know. Mase brought him in."

She laid the small flat package on the counter. Garrison paid her and waited while she went back to an under-counter cash drawer for his change.

Garrison's unobtrusive glance raked three men who came out of the back room. The black cloth sleeve-guards would be on Jason McKay, the girl's father. He was a thin, erect, briskly-moving man with a still-tawny mustache.

Mase Bragdon, younger than Garrison would have guessed from his heavy voice, was a burly young fellow, a cocky angle to his gray hat, a satisfied smile on his smooth-shaven face. A double-gun young fellow with a swagger.

The third man was the horse buyer, the stranger whose voice had struck Jimmy Green cold with memory.

That one had a tough, old-leather look. Medium-built, he had a long, thin nose, a grizzled mustache on a narrow face and a mouth almost wolflike in faintly sneering arrogance. Another double-gun man. A lean, dangerous oldster. What did not

show about him Garrison already knew, after this man and his friends had ridden away from John Farrow's place.

The three men entered a cluttered, glassed-in office enclosure at the back corner of the store. The girl returned with change, smiling. "I thought Mase would buy that horse. He came home only last week. If he's going to stay deputy under his father he'll need a good horse."

Garrison stood with change in one hand, package in the other. "Where's Mase Bragdon been?" he questioned idly.

She laughed softly. "To hear Mase tell it, everywhere. He hasn't been back for more than a few days at a time in years."

Garrison knew she watched him out of the store. Another time he would have stayed, as a thirsty man lingers by sparkling water. Jimmy Green had locked the hotel room door. Garrison sailed the flat handkerchief package to the bed.

"He isn't the man we've been following. Looks like a bad-acting old lobo wolf. Scar up the side of his neck, behind the ear."

"Neck scar!" Jimmy Green's head bobbed in sudden remembrance. "That neck-scarred stranger stopped at the San Carlos mine a few months ago. Prospecting, he said. Name was—Carter! That's it—Windy Carter!"

"Any name will do," said Garrison shortly. He was checking his six-gun. "Young fellow named Mase Bragdon, the sheriff's son, with with him." Garrison's look was hard with speculation. "Young Bragdon's been away for years. Just back. I wonder where he was the night John Farrow was murdered?"

Jimmy Green's mouth was open soundlessly and Garrison considered him soberly. "You recognized the voice. Now you better head out to the railroad after dark."

Jimmy Green had a drawn and worried look as he nodded.

Behind screening peaks, far from the railroad, Talus was a small but solid town,

gateway to the back mountain country. Wagon and stage traffic, trade and strangers made Talus prosperous.

Garrison pondered all that as he had a shave at a barber shop and moved on for casual drinks and talk in the saloons.

He had a tight feeling of danger. On the long trail danger had been ahead. Always ahead. Now any man he stood beside at a bar might be danger.

News of the raid on Farrow's ranch had spread. It had been printed in distant weekly newspapers. Here in Talus Garrison heard a bearded rancher speak of it over a beer bottle.

"Wonder if they found out who shot up that ranch house near Napa?"

And now young Mase Bragdon was friendly with the lean, wolf-like oldster who'd left his voice and neck scar in Jimmy Green's drunken memory. Garrison looked for a tall, yellow-haired man with a fat brown paper cigarette.

Others of that renegade gang might have visited the Ventana mine and been familiar with Dave Garrison's face. Already he might have been recognized. It made Garrison coldly wary of any man who looked his way.

He saw the burly figure of Mase Bragdon turn into a small frame building across the street which housed the weekly *Talus Times*. Garrison built a cigarette and crossed to the newspaper office.

THE smell of paper and printer's ink met him inside. A red-headed girl, tall and lithe, left her table desk and came to the counter. Mase Bragdon sat beside her table and weighed the stranger.

"I'm a stranger, ma'am," said Garrison mildly. "Would the paper know of any bargain land for sale not too far from town?"

She said lightly, "The *Times* knows everything." Her glance went over to Mase Bragdon. "Mase, are you thinking of selling that Moose Creek place your

mother left you? Or won't you know until you take Nancy McKay to the dance tonight?"

Mase grinned. "That's somethin' for the paper to find out, Alma." He came to the counter. "Where you from, mister?"

"Texas. The Big Bend," said Garrison in some truth. He'd been in the wild Big Bend country at one time.

"I rode through there," said Mase Bragdon. "Camped at Dry Well store, run by that one-legged Mexican named Sanchez. Know him?"

"Dry Well store is run by old Comanch Walker, the one-eyed old hellion."

Mase Bragdon grinned. "Got my stores mixed. You're right."

He came through the counter gate. "Alma has got to look for some news to print. She won't be interested in our talk." He left Alma irritated, and enjoyed it. But when they turned along the walk, Mase Bragdon said bluntly, "I got a small place I'll sell cheap in a quick cash trade."

Garrison had entered the newspaper office on the chance of idle talk with the sheriff's burly son. He hadn't looked for this. But he said, "Sounds good. Let's ride out and see your place."

Mase Bragdon hesitated. "Tomorrow," he decided. "I seen you in McKay's store. Fellow I was with is looking for a small ranch too. Only his cash ain't so quick. The place is yours, mister, if you like it tomorrow."

"Got to be a real bargain."

"It will be!"

After young Bragdon left him, Garrison sat in a weathered splint rocker on the hotel veranda, and considered.

Mase Bragdon had been home a few days. Talus folks thought he meant to settle down, but Mase Bragdon didn't think so. Wouldn't be offering his land cheap, for a quick sale, if he meant to settle down. And Bragdon was taking Nancy McKay to a dance tonight.

A man came by wearing the sheriff's badge. Garrison leaned forward a little, studying Tom Bragdon, the sheriff. He was big, like his son, stooping a little, hair white, deep lines on his face, as if he had had his share of worry. A big, placid man, this sheriff, with none of his son's swagger, but with a solidness which suggested that the sheriff's badge was worn by a good man.

Alma, the redhead, came briskly along the walk and spoke with the sheriff. Both stood smiling, and when Alma came on, she stopped at the low veranda rail, an arm's reach away.

Her smile had a different quality, an anxiety. "Did you buy the ranch? The *Times* likes to print everything."

"Nice town," said Garrison readily. "Nice folks. Pretty girls. Any man would like to settle around here."

Her hat was small and perky. She was pretty and she knew it. Her mouth was

ripe and her gray-greenish eyes challenging. She said, "So Mase is thinking of selling?"

Garrison's grin told her nothing. "Ask Mase at the dance tonight," he suggested. "I'm not going to the dance."

Garrison leaned forward, not sure why he said, "I'd be honored, ma'am, if you'd consider going to the dance with me."

She was startled. Garrison guessed she was not as bold as her ripe mouth and greenish-gray eyes suggested. He watched purpose come to her. "I'll go," she decided.

Jimmy Green was pacing the hotel room nervously when Garrison walked in.

"I'm staying in town," the little San Carlos bookkeeper said half-defiantly.

Garrison peered at the smaller man. "Why?"

Jimmy Green muttered, "A man can't keep running from himself. I saw what you saw at Farrow's ranch. Heard some

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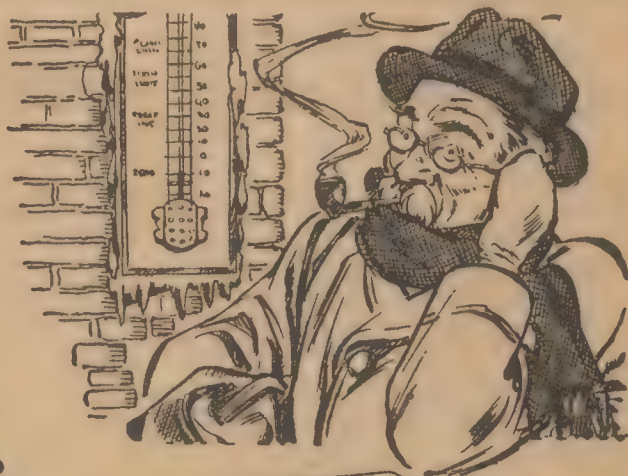
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of it. I guess I got to stay." He swallowed hard. "What do we do?"

Garrison's smile was slow and warming.

"You're a better man than started with me. But keep out of sight. I'm taking a lady to a dance tonight."

"That girl at the store?"

"No. From the paper. A redhead. And don't ask me why. I'm not sure myself," said Garrison a little sheepishly.

THAT evening at the schoolhouse with his pretty red-headed partner, Garrison knew he'd come because Nancy McKay would be here. And he was uneasy already.

Alma Stevens had said there'd be no guns at the dance, and he'd left cartridge belt and six-shooter at her house. Garrison had a feeling he shouldn't have come; not in Talus, not without his gun.

This was a middle-of-the-week dance, gotten up by friends on Nancy's twenty-first birthday. When Garrison walked in with Alma Stevens, his first thought was that Nancy was the prettiest girl on the dance floor. Her tawny hair was caught back and her blue eyes were sparkling.

Mase Bragdon, in gray broadcloth and black string tie, was dancing with Nancy. Garrison felt Alma Stevens's hand tighten on his arm. He caught a shadow of unhappiness in her eyes.

"Mase is a fine dancer," Alma said, and Garrison felt sorry for her. She wanted Mase Bragdon and Mase had another girl.

Pine branches and flowers decorated the room. This was Talus enjoying itself away from the saloons. Garrison hadn't been in such neighborly fun in a long time. None of the men wore guns. The edge of Garrison's uneasiness dulled.

Mase Bragdon grinned when he saw Garrison and his partner. Mase didn't seem to mind, or to mind who danced with Nancy McKay either. Presently he vanished. Later Garrison saw him coming

in from the back with a flush on his heavy face. Mase Bragdon came over, grinning. He smelled of whiskey.

"Step out back an' grab a snort, mister."

"Might do it," Garrison assented.

Mase wiped a hand across his mouth. "I'm still dry." He went out back again.

Garrison was waiting his chance at Nancy McKay's side alone. He caught it and smiled down at her. "Your birthday party is nice, ma'am."

"I'm glad you could come with Alma." Nancy had been glowing. She sobered now. "I saw Mase come in. He's drinking, and the Bragdon men always get mean when they drink." She looked around. "Alma Stevens might talk him out of it."

"He came with you, ma'am," suggested Garrison.

"Mase's folks have always lived next door. When Mase quarreled with Alma, he was nice to me to get back at her. Alma and I are used to it," Nancy said absently.

"I thought Bragdon had settled down with a steady girl," Garrison murmured.

"Mase is fiddle-footed. Alma knows it, but she wants to believe he might settle down this time. There she is. I'll get her. . . ."

The girls came to him. Alma Stevens had a determined look. "Tell Mase to come in," she requested firmly.

Garrison went because misery lurked in her eyes, and because Nancy McKay wasn't Mase Bragdon's girl after all.

Out back of the schoolhouse, he was blind for a moment in the starry night. A voice said, "Here's a jug. If you git too happy an' git throwed out, it's your hard luck." Chuckles came from other men standing around. Cigarette ends were glowing. The back door spewed light briefly as another man came out.

Garrison tilted the wicker-covered jug on his bent arm and made a show of drinking. He passed the jug to the new-

comer and peered around at the dark figures. "Mase Bragdon here?"

"Mase went off," he was answered. "Fellow rode up an' called Mase over for a talk. Mase come back for another drink an' walked away."

"Who talked with Bragdon?"

"A long-legged stranger. Yellow mustache. I seen him in the light from the side windows. Black horse."

"Sheriff's business," Garrison guessed.

Alma Stevens gave him an inquiring look when he came in alone. Something in his manner made her intent.

"Bragdon was called away, ma'am. And I've just remembered some business I must see to." Garrison made a helpless gesture. "I shouldn't have asked you to come."

Alma said calmly, "Can you take me home?"

Garrison had rented a rig. On the short drive, Alma asked only one sober question. "Do you really expect to buy Mase's land?"

"I don't know what I'll do," said Garrison truthfully.

"So he does want to sell!" said Alma under her breath. She sat quietly in a kind of resignation and Garrison guessed she was putting away long-lived hopes about Mase Bragdon.

Only when he stepped from her door with his gunbelt's comforting weight around his middle did Garrison relax a little.

Under the smoky lantern in the livery stable, the hostler commented, "You didn't stay out long." He was an unshaven ancient with a few tooth snags and a cheek packed with tobacco. He put the hire money in a long leather purse and gossiped, "Had a stranger in tonight with a black horse and a yellow mustache. Friend o' yours?"

"I'd have to see him."

The hostler grinned. "He aimed to put his hoss up. Then he seen your partner's

hoss. He took the lantern off the nail an' studied the brand. Asked if there was a JF brand around here an' who rode the hoss in. Took a look at that dun hoss of yourn too. Said he'd be back later an' rode on."

A man could live with a fact until he forgot it. Garrison had roped one of John Farrow's horses for Jimmy Green the day they ridden away from the new-dug graves. The brand hadn't seemed to matter until now.

"I'll saddle my horse," Garrison decided.

HE LEFT the hostler very curious. The stony look was chiseled back on his face as he rode out to find the sheriff. And his mind jumped back to Ike Fanning and Yuma Charley, wondering where they were.

The sheriff's small white house was dark and the courthouse was dark too. Garrison turned along Main Street, looking for the stranger with the yellow mustache, or Mase Bragdon or the sheriff.

He saw a shaded lamp burning in the newspaper office. Alma was writing at her table desk when Garrison stepped in. She wore the same white party dress of soft watered silk and must have come directly here from her house, restless and disturbed. She faced him across the counter, explaining, "I thought I'd write a piece about the dance."

Garrison nodded and asked, "Seen Mase or his father? I can't seem to find them."

"Is something wrong?"

"What could be wrong?" Garrison parried.

Alma knew he evaded and she hesitated, searching his face.

"A rancher out toward Moose Creek noticed smoke coming from the chimney of the old Bragdon house out there. He stopped here and wondered if someone was living there now. I asked Tom Brag-

don. He said squatters might be using the house and he'd ride out that way after supper and see."

"Mase knew his father rode out there?"

"I don't think so."

"I'll ride that way and meet the sheriff," Garrison decided. "Mind telling me how to go?"

Jimmy Green had the door of their hotel room locked. "I seen you ride up," the little man said when he let Garrison in. "I been sitting at the front window in the dark. I seen a tall fellow with a yellow mustache come by on a black horse!"

"I know," Garrison nodded. He caught his Winchester from the room corner and checked it. "We made one mistake. That JF brand on your horse. Yellow Mustache saw it at the stable. He didn't have to guess why that brand was in Talus. Keep your door locked."

"I'll go with you," said Jimmy Green at once. He had a shaky strained look.

"Stay here," Garrison insisted. "I'm riding to Moose Creek to find the sheriff. It's his move. I'll give him his chance."

Garrison scanned the shadows closely as he rode out of town. He was the hunted now, and only aware of it because he'd taken a red-headed girl to a dance. The deck was stacked, and the two jokers were Mase Bragdon and Tom Bragdon, the sheriff. Tom Bragdon might have ridden to the Moose Creek place from curiosity—or he might have carried a warning.

The night had a wind-stroked coolness, with chunks drifting under the spattered stars. The dun's long run flung its dust-muffled tattoo into the lonely dark. After some miles Garrison swung left off the main stage road into a narrower way snaking through the first rough foothills.

Alma had said the Brandon place was a rough bit of foothill graze with the first mountains piling behind it. Garrison hoped to meet the returning sheriff, but did not. He rode finally down a pitch of

road to the brawling water of Moose Creek and followed tree-dotted meadows upstream. Brush had taken the old ranch road. Small gullies had chewed the down-pitching wheel ruts.

Alma Stevens had warned of a wire gate in the brush almost a mile from the house. It was there, closed. Garrison stepped down and led his horse through. Light wind rustled through the tall brush. Coyotes were clamoring along the ridge crests. The horse nickered and Garrison looked sharply ahead.

He froze as a command rasped at his left, "Git 'em up or git shot!"

The man was close and invisible in the murky tangle of brush. Garrison had a flash of agonizing indecision. It could be sheriff Tom Bragdon, scouting the property, with a right to question an intruder. Blasting a shot in reply could be the greatest mistake Dave Garrison ever made.

If he killed the Talus sheriff, he'd change from Ike Fanning's deputy to outlaw. If the sheriff's leveled gun shot him down, all the hard patience of the long trail was wasted.

Garrison's frozen moment was the price for living inside the law. His chance passed. He lifted hands shoulder level.

CHAPTER THREE

Cold-Decked

BRUSH crackled and Garrison had the truth of it. They came at him from front and back. Two men. The one who'd had a six-gun cocked in the brush at his back was the wolf-like oldster who'd bought Jason McKay's horse.

He caught Garrison's gun from the holster and whipped the barrel to the side of Garrison's face, cursing as Garrison staggered.

"This one come with that JF horse! An' easin' out here at us already! I got

a mind to blow his damn brains all over the bushes!"

He said it without much anger, as he'd shoot a rattler. But the other one was younger and sharply nervous.

"Take him to the house. We got to git holt of what he knows!"

"We'll git it! They ain't no anthills around here! But when he sees grease roastin' outa his bare feet, he'll get talky! Git his rifle, bring my hoss, an' then shut that gate up an' watch it!"

Garrison climbed his saddle and wiped his blood-dripping chin over against his shoulder. His head felt like it had been split open. He was still dizzy and he had small hope. The long trail had started in death and was ending in death.

A rope loop pulled tight around his middle was dallied to the saddle horn of the grizzled gunman who sided him with gun cocked and oaths and questions driving at him.

"Where'd you come from? What's your name? Who else is around here from the south?"

"Go to hell!" said Garrison, and thought for a minute he'd get shot. But it held off.

The Bragdon house had a dark, deserted look. Windows were boarded up, warped clapboards falling away. Wild brush grew up against the house. Garrison's man gave two short, sharp whistles. A dim figure with a shotgun stepped out of the brush. The front door flung open as Garrison dismounted and stepped out of the rope loop. The big, white-haired man who came out of the house, gun in hand, called, "Who is it?"

When he heard, his oaths were tremendous and blistering. His rolling voice was rich with satisfaction.

"Bring the misguided blacksheep in! We'll baptize the sin outa him 'till hell won't have him!"

Lanterns lit a front room to the right of the doorway. An old warped kitchen

table held whiskey bottles, a water bucket, tin cups and greasy tin plates. Tom Bragdon, the sheriff, was tied in one of the chairs and watched by a lean brown gunman with white hair and strong Mexican cast.

Tom Bragdon was puzzled by the bloody-faced prisoner. "I seen you in town. What'n hell are you doing in this?"

Garrison said, "Deputy sheriff trailing the bunch who wiped out the Farrow ranch." And as Bragdon's mouth dropped open, Garrison said, "How come they're meeting in your town and your house?"

It hit the graying sheriff like a blow. Yellow Mustache walked in, tall and leathery, and older than Garrison had guessed. A fat brown paper cigarette was on his lip and he poured a tin cup of whiskey while he looked Garrison over.

"Deputy, huh?" he said tersely. "Where's the other one?"

"We'll git him!" The big white-haired man said it as he poured whiskey too. Hard riding had thinned him until skin hung in folds on his heavy face. He gulped a big drink and gestured at Garrison with the tin cup. "The Lord delivered the skunk to our mercies!"

Yellow Mustache said, "Stop spoutin' that Bible talk. Gits on my nerves!"

"The hell with your nerves, Red! I've talked that way so much it comes natural!"

Garrison reached for a drink. They let him. He lowered the cup and grinned.

"That mealy-mouthed talk got Whitey Bell out of prison and put fat on his belly while he preached on sin and booze along the tent meeting trail. But the Rawhide Kid never took it up, did he?"

The big white-haired man's tin cup bounced clattering on the table. His fast-drawn Colt's covered Garrison.

"What'n hell do you know about the Rawhide Kid?"

Tom Bragdon looked dazed as all four gunmen were startled into tense anger.

"You hauled the Kid up by his heels but you didn't get his money," Garrison guessed. "Not even staking his Mexican on an anthill did any good." Garrison looked around at them and shook his head. "The Rawhide Kid and Whitey Bell, Mex Peters, Red Malloy and others of the old bunch were all forgotten. But the Kid settled down with money. And the rest of the bunch who weren't hanged come at him like wolves fanging their own pack. Damn well served you right you rode away empty-handed!"

Big Whitey Bell bellowed in rage.

"The Kid shoulda been staked on that damn anthill! He died on me afore I got started with him, damn his thievin' heart! He dug up our money an' run out on us! I mighta stayed outa prison with some of that money! He left us busted an' got clean outa the country! While I rotted in that cell, I prayed on my knees every night to git out an' find the Kid! I never stopped lookin' for a man with his little finger shot off! The other boys kep' lookin' too! But we found him and come to collect! And he died laughin' at his old partners while I prayed with him to git right with his conscience an' give back that money he stole from us!"

GARRISON said disgustedly, "Don't talk to me about praying! I saw what your bunch left at his place. A pack of murdering hogs ran wild that night!"

Windy Carter's laugh was malicious. "Whitey, he sure read the sign! We aimed to get rich again and we had to scatter an' run same as we done after the Kid cleaned us out! We figgered even the old-timers had forgot us, an' now they're on our trail, just like in the old days. All these years an' they ain't forgot us!"

Windy said it with pride out of the long past. He was one of the wild young kill-crazy bunch from the Green River

country—now old, grizzled and even more dangerous.

Silence dropped as voices sounded outside. Guns were out as Mase Bragdon's burly bulk came hurriedly into the room, "So Garrison came snooping—"

Mase broke off at sight of his father tied in the old straight-backed chair. He gulped hard. Tom Bragdon had been silent. He sat silent now, staring at his son.

Whitey Bell grinned sourly. "Garrison ain't the only one come snooping. Thought you said no one bothered this place."

Mase went to a whiskey bottle and drank straight from the neck. "It's my place," he said sullenly, slapping the bottle down. "How'd I know the old man'd come here?" He glowered at Garrison. "Sent him out here, did you?"

Tom Bragdon spoke then, evenly. "Mase, were you with these men when they murdered everyone at the JF ranch?"

Mase said dazedly, "They done that?" He swung to Whitey Bell. "That ain't right, is it?"

"It ain't your business!" said Whitey Bell shortly. "You was with Windy and Mex and the others on plenty rustling." Whitey Bell reached for the bottle.

"Rustlin' is only rustlin'," said Mase thickly. "I thought—"

Whitey Bell lowered the bottle and gave the burly younger man a cold look. "You thought we come in here to hole up an' plan a little rustling over acrost the mountains. An' you'd be sportin' your deputy's badge an' workin' with us. But we changed our minds. Before we move on tomorrow, we'll take all the cash in that damn bank in town, an' your old man can cover up for us."

Mase spoke with a hoarse note. "He won't do that!"

"Then we'll stuff him under the dirt afore we ride to town tomorrow," said Whitey Bell roughly. "You never had

no use for him nohow. I mind you told the boys you couldn't stand it at home, which is why you cut an' run when you was a button. No mother an' a old man who whaled hell outa you."

Tom Bragdon muttered, "I tried to be a mother an' a father—guess I missed it all around." His eyes came up, watching Mase. "So you turned out a thief?"

"I ain't the only one who ever rustled," said Mase sullenly.

"You're the only Bragdon who ever did!"

Windy said with his thin-lipped arrogance, "The hell with rustlin'! We got deputies from Napa to settle, an' money to draw outa the bank in the mornin'! Mase, you're a thief like the rest of us! Don't git mealy-faced. We're lettin' you off from the bank job, so you kin use that badge to mess up the posse that'll try to foller us. It's that or you get hung for a damn rustler! If they get you back on the Frio, enough dirt will be laid on you to drag that big neck out like a bullwhacker's whip!"

"A sinner gits his pay in death, even if his pappy is a sheriff," said Whitey Bell, grinning coldly. "We'll leave your old man tied up here. You an' the posse can find him tomorrow after we've smoked across the mountains. There's sure as hell to be someone kilt tomorrow. So if he opens his mouth, he'll be hangin' his own flesh an' blood."

Tom Bragdon sat watching his son. He had no expression. Mase jerked his head at Garrison. "What about this one?"

"He's a damn depity who's been trailin' us! I aim to kill him tonight!"

Sweat glistened on Mase Bragdon's face as he looked at Garrison.

"Don't worry about me," said Garrison with a kind of savage contempt.

Mase reddened. "I ain't worryin' about a stranger who comes lyin' to me about buying my land!"

That hit Tom Bragdon hard, too. "You were dickerin' to sell this place your mother left you, Mase?"

"It's mine, aint it?"

"She said so, Mase. You were born in the back bedroom there. She thought you were the finest baby any mother ever had." Tom Bragdon looked down at the floor. "What she left you is yours," he said quietly and did not look up as Whitey Bell's impatient oath ripped out.

"We're talkin' bank money, not babies! How about it, Mase? The boys was good enough to rustle with! Now they got to get a cash stake an' move on! You aim to help?"

MASE slopped whiskey into a tin cup. "I mean to ride after you!" he said thickly. "The old man'll hang me like a stranger! I know him! Ask him!"

HEADACHE

**UPSET
STOMACH**

**JUMPY
NERVES**



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Tom Bragdon spoke heavily. He sounded like a sick man. "Don't waste talk asking. My son knows me—and now I know my son."

Mase gulped his whiskey. He tossed the cup on the table and shoved his hat to a cocky angle. "I'll ride back to town an' cry about it!"

Whitey Bell differed flatly. "You ain't gettin' drunk in town tonight! Ride in after daylight an' lay low. When hell busts loose, hold the posse back. We'll do the rest. Been through it plenty in the old days."

"Suppose I can't hold 'em back?" Mase was surly.

Windy spat on the floor. "Then hang back yourself! First ones close gets lead first!"

Garrison was watching Tom Bragdon. It was not pleasant to see a good man die inside. Gunfire brought quick death—clean death. But Tom Bragdon's heart, pride and long-built hopes were dying in slow misery. He'd lost his wife and lived for his son, hoping like Alma Stevens had hoped.

Now Tom Bragdon had the truth.

Windy Carter stepped to Garrison's shoulder, holding a bone-handled Colt. "We got a depity waitin'." His thin grin held anticipation.

"Hold off!" ordered Whitey Bell. "I got an idea. Red brought the news about the JF horse. Garrison has talked out what we need to know." Whitey Bell moved over for more whiskey. "The Book says justice oughta be mixed with mercy."

"There you go again!" said Windy disgustedly.

Whitey Bell lowered the tin cup and smacked his lips. "In the morning we'll give him empty guns an' take him to the bank with us. That'll be mercy. When the shootin' starts, we'll gut-shoot him. If Mase is in sight, Mase can swear he kilt Garrison. Them fools in town will

waste time figgerin' Garrison is one of us. That'll be justice for a damn depity who follered us!"

"I don't aim to wait that long!" said Windy coldly. "Here's my justice—"

Garrison thought it was a bullet. He wheeled fast and smashed hard knuckles to Windy's sneering mouth and nose. The gun barrel striking at his head swung off wildly as Windy staggered. Garrison jumped to snatch the gun.

He sighted Mase Bragdon lunging toward him. Mase's smashing gun barrel dropped him cold to the floor. . . .

Outdoors on the hard weed-covered ground Garrison's eyes finally opened. Cold stars pin-pointed through thinning clouds. He was hog-tied, gagged. When he moved and grunted from pain, a boot kicked his rib.

"Keep quiet! Folks is sleepin'!"

Snores drifted out of the nearby brush. Tarp rolls had been brought outside and a guard left against surprise. A horse nickered back of the house where the old corral would be. Garrison closed his eyes and after a little he slept.

He woke with dawn chill clammy on him. Men were moving about in the gray light. He watched Mase Bragdon tramp back to the corral. Tom Bragdon came out of the house with stiff steps and a gun muzzle at his back.

Tom Bragdon was standing there before the house when Mase rode his horse from the corral, Whitey Bell and Windy walking beside him.

"You know what to do," said Whitey. "Git goin'."

Mase rode off without looking toward his father. Tom Bragdon stood there, stiffly straight, arms lashed behind with buckskin thongs. He watched Mase out of sight with a gray, haggard look. Then he obeyed the prodding gun and walked silently into the house.

Windy Carter came over. His nose had bled and his upper lip was puffy. He

drove a kick savagely to Garrison's side.

"I'll gut-shoot you in town!" he promised thinly.

Two hours later Garrison rode off with them. He'd washed blood off his face, been fed bacon, beans and coffee. Rifle was in the saddle scabbard, side gun in its holster. Both guns were loaded with empty shells.

Grub was rolled in blankets behind all saddles. They carried nothing else but guns and ammunition. The other guard at the wire gate last night, and the guard posted outside the house all night were younger men. They'd been rustling with these older renegades like Mase Bragdon had been, Garrison guessed.

The pace was easy toward Talus. Garrison rode thinking of Tom Bragdon, tied and helpless in the old house where, as a young man, he'd faced life with his young wife.

Garrison's glance roved to the aging renegades, riding again out of the past, with younger men following their orders. They'd lived too long.

Whitey Bell chortled as they cut across the rough foothills, avoiding the roads. "Makes me feel twenty years younger!" Talus was in sight from a low ridge crest when Whitey pulled up.

"We'll split here, boys. Mex, you an' Joe cut over to the west road an' ease into town thataway. Curly, you side Windy on the north road. Tie your horses at the side rack of the bank."

WINDY cursed with a vicious note. "I aim to keep close to his damn depity! He's mine!"

"There ain't gonna be no gut-shootin' for fun ahead of time, Windy! And you'd do it, you blood-drinkin' old goat!"

"Who you callin' names, Whitey? We'll shoot it out now!"

Garrison poised stiffly. But the tall taciturn Red, with the yellow mustache, said, "Curly, you go with Mex and Joe!

This ain't no time to tangle with Windy! He's like he used to be. Only worse!"

Windy's puffy lip had a wolf-sneer of satisfaction as he stayed close to Garrison.

The three men rode off smartly. Garrison was boxed by the three who were left as they leisurely cut into the north stage road not a mile from town.

It was a blazing morning with a great arc of brassy-blue sky. A six-horse stage whirled out of town. Whitey Bell waved genially. The driver saluted with his whip. Their leisurely progress went by the outer corrals and sheds of town. A button of a kid ran to a yard gate and waved. Whitey waved back.

Since last night Garrison's cold patience had held him passive, like a slaughter-bound sheep. He'd come a long way after this bunch. In Talus, on the main street, he could die to better purpose. Garrison had even nursed a small idea based only on hope. He waited, stony-faced, boxed in by the three gunmen as they advanced at a walk.

The same snag-toothed hostler stood in the yawning doorway of the livery barn and grinned at them.

Red's hand answered the hostler. They passed by the Talus Times and Garrison sighted the soft red hair of Alma Stevens as she stood inside the counter talking to two men and a woman. Alma moved to see better through the front windows. She was puzzled, uncertain. Garrison looked away, afraid she might come out and call to him, and so find trouble.

Then they came to the hotel. Garrison glanced up at the windows of the big corner room on the second story. Cracked window shades were pulled half down. Brassy sun glare struck in against a small shadowy figure peering down at the street: Jimmy Green, still locked in, worried, watchful, who had sighted the yellow-mustached gunman they'd trailed so long.

Garrison let out a soft slow breath. This was all he could hope for. They were

wheeling in to the bank hitchrack opposite the hotel. Mex Peters and the two younger men loitered on the corner, waiting.

A man came out of the bank and walked away. Whitey Bell spoke under his breath. "Tie your horses! Mex, Red an' me will go in! Stand here at the hitchrack, Windy, with this damn depity! Curly an' Joe stays on the corner there!"

Windy watched from the saddle until Garrison stepped down. Whitey Bell and Red waited until Windy was down. Then they walked into the bank. Mex Peters idled in behind them like any other depositor.

Talus had never been more peaceful. A man laughed inside an open doorway nearby. Two bonneted women left a buggy in front of McKay's general store and went inside. The musical clanging of a blacksmith's hammer beat rhythmically through the glass-clear sunlight.

Garrison took perhaps his last look around on earth. Windy stood two steps away, hands poised near the low-slung belt guns. His long, flat nose flared stiffly above grizzled mustache and puffy lip. The wolf-like sneer had never been stronger as he watched the prisoner.

Garrison's sweeping look touched the window where Jimmy Green had been watching. Heart leaped. Breath stopped. His glance cut on down without expression.

That window, he saw, was halfway up now. . . .

Then suddenly Garrison's stare fixed in cold resentment on the open hotel doorway.

Mase Bragdon's burly figure was swaggering out on the veranda.

"There's your dirty deputy!" said Garrison through tight lips.

Windy looked and cursed softly. "Whyn't the fool keep outa sight!"

Then death crashed a gunshot inside the bank. . . .

MASE BRAGDON ran off the hotel veranda as Garrison jumped at Windy with flesh braced against the smashing slugs Windy would drive into him. He saw Windy's palms slap to the waiting guns.

Whitey Bell was bellowing orders inside the bank. A shot roared from the corner where the younger gunmen stood. And Windy took a queer, lurching step, his hatchet face contorted. A tiny hole had been drilled in Windy's upper vest pocket. Back on his heels, Windy wavered as Garrison flung out a hand and caught one of the guns. It spurted hot powder burns along his wrist. He tried to get the other gun as it swung toward his body. The gun swerved down under his grasp and crashed flame almost against his upper leg. The bullet blow had axe force, numbing the leg.

The leg bone was not splintered for it held strongly under the surge of Garrison's desperation. He caught the second gun too, twisting the muzzle away. His lunge drove Windy back. The first gun came away in the mighty wrench Garrison gave it.

He palmed the heavy steel flatly to Windy's temple with fury that doubled strength. And Windy suddenly was only a sack of flesh, collapsing weakly.

Garrison snatched the other gun off the walk cinders where it had dropped, and almost sprawled flat from the bad leg. He staggered over against the brick building front and straightened, with both guns settling hard in perspiring palms.

A bullet whee-eeed off the bricks just above his head. Joe had shot at him from the corner. Garrison triggered shots and Joe ducked to the shelter of the bank corner. Windy was flat on his face. A rifle muzzle thrusting out the second story hotel window hurled its flat report across the street once more. The little San Carlos bookkeeper had drilled Windy and his ledgers were free of doubt.

Garrison swung muzzles toward Mase Bragdon, then held fire. Mase was walking across the street with both guns out. His broad face was grinning. One gun fired, and then the other. Fast hammering shots around the bank corner replied as Mase advanced, still grinning.

Mase was shooting at Joe and Curly. Double-crossing his rustling pardners.

Garrison had only an instant to think of old Tom Bragdon helplessly waiting. . . . Then Whitey Bell came plunging out of the bank, gun in one hand, heavy canvas sack in the other hand.

"You double-crossin' skunk!"

Whitey Bell came out of the bank in that bellowing lunge, opening fire on Mase. Mex Peters and the tall lean Red came spilling out at his heels.

Mase had halted in the street dust near the corner, his gun wiping away as lead hit him somewhere. His guns swung toward Whitey Bell. There fire crashed at each other and Garrison shot at the long lean Red he'd trailed so far.

Red had dropped the canvas sack and made a cat-like spring at sight of him. Trail sign had marked Red a dead shot. Garrison's bullet hit him. Red's spurting gun muzzle smashed lead along Garrison's side. The trail ended here for one of them.

The triggered gun in his right hand leaped and roared, and Red folded over, catching at his middle. Garrison reeled, gasping for breath. Mex Peters was down and coming up on a knee, dark face twisting as he brought a six-gun up and fired at Garrison.

He missed. Garrison steadied again with another great effort. His shot drove Mex over backward. Whitey Bell swung around in a lurching run toward his horse, smoking gun in one hand, canvas sack in the other.

Garrison got his breath.

"Judgment Day, Whitey!"

Both his blasting guns tore lead through the big man's torso. Whitey Bell sprawled

down toward Windy's feet. The untied sack spilled gold coins over the walk. Whitey Bell's outreaching convulsive hand clawed up gold pieces bright and yellow in the sunlight. He clutched them tightly as he died, rich finally, for a few last seconds. . . .

The gunfire had stopped. Townsfolk were fearfully coming out along the walks as Garrison hobbled out through the dust to Mase Bragdon. Mase's shirt was wet with blood, and one arm hung limply. His grin was a crooked effort. Words came thickly. -

"Tell the old man they'd have killed us all last night if I hadn't played along—" Mase swallowed hard. "He made a good father an' mother! Wish I—"

A slim, flying, red-headed figure came to them. Alma went to her knees unheeding in the street dust. "Mase! Mase!"

"Tom Bragdon's tied up at Mase's old house! Get out there alone, Alma, an' bring him back! Tell him I said Mase can't keep the law in town alone. Tell him I said Mase don't know he's out there. I'll swear Mase is lying if he says so!"

Alma's greenish-gray eyes held the truth, the hurt, and a great new hope as she looked at Garrison and then full into Mase's face.

"The *Talus Times* knows everything," said Alma unsteadily. "But it doesn't print all it knows, Mase, you fiddle-footed fool!"

"Mase has settled down," said Garrison, smiling with an effort. "Nice folks, a fine town, pretty girls. Might stay myself."

"Nancy McKay would like that," Alma told him quickly.

"I'm staying, then," said Garrison. His thoughts flashed to the past and the long trail, and settled again here in Talus where the trail had ended. He was smiling a little about the future as the first running men reached them.



"Masters was a crack shot, so there's a way to prove what you say. Ready?"

Hang the Man High!

"Welcome to Blood Canyon, mister, where guns make the law and bullets back it up . . . an' strangers don't hang around—except by the neck!"

OF THE three men who were to hang at daybreak the Mexican was the most composed. Rolling a last cigarette, he smoked it with full enjoyment; then, wrapping his head in

By DAY KEENE

his ragged serape to keep the firelight out of his eyes, he consigned his soul to God and lay down to sleep until the matter of the morning should transpire.

The youth with the red hair and the bloody bandage around his forehead was nervous, but defiant. He sat with his back against a tree, his eyes flicking constantly into the wall of night beyond the fire as if seeking some unguarded avenue of escape. There was none. The range had suffered too greatly, and lost too many cows. A dozen men ringed the fire. As many more, worn out by the long chase, had spread their bedrolls in the shadows. There was a constant thud of hoofs, jingle of accoutrements, and whinnying of horses, as fresh riders joined the group around the fire. Overhead, the huge limbs of the cottonwood that was to serve as a gallows loomed large against the sky.

The third man of the trio, an old man with white hair and rheumy, sun-faded, blue eyes, sat seemingly stunned by the predicament in which he found himself.

"We caught them red-handed with thirty head at Seven Mile Hole," Miles Ross told a new-comer. Men listened with respect when he spoke. He owned the largest spread in the valley. He was old Miles Ross's grandson. "But danged if they didn't cut and run for it. We might never have come up with them if the young one's horse hadn't gone lame."

Horvell wanted to know if anyone had been hurt.

Ross shook his head. "A couple of the boys were winged, but they're all of them blamed bad shots. They had us against the skyline, too, a couple of times." He nudged the old man with the toe of his boot, harder than he had intended. "How about that, granpop? How come you've lived so long and stayed so poor a shot?"

The old man's eyes flashed fire but he said nothing. The youth with the red hair said, "Leave him alone, cowboy. You've got us. You're going to hang us. There's

no need kicking the old man that way."

Color crept into the rider's cheeks. "I didn't go for to kick him," he said truthfully. "I just meant to nudge him with my boot."

"Then keep your feet to yourself," the youth said. He sounded like a San Francisco tough. But for the tattered chaps and the big hat he was wearing he might have been a Barbary Coast bully boy.

"Spunky, eh?" Horvell grinned. "Anyone know who they are?"

"Does it matter?" Ross asked. "But just to keep the brands straight, they call the young one Red. He calls the old man Pop. And they both call the Mexican Charlie."

Stretching in his sleep the Mexican had disarranged his serape. His lined face in the flickering firelight was like well-aged and wrinkled parchment.

One of the circle of riders toasting first their hands and then their buttocks at the fire wanted to know why they were waiting for daybreak to hang them.

"We want to do a good job," Ross told him. "We'd also like to know what they did with the rest of the beef they've rustled since they've been working this range. But nary a one of them will talk."

"I could make them talk," a man said.

Ross shook his head. "No. None of that." He looked at the red-haired youth. "Despite what our young friend here seems to think I don't hold with kicking a man when he's down. Come dawn we'll hang them and let it go at that."

Making certain the hands of the three men were still tied, he drifted with Horvell to the far side of the fire where a rider from the Wolf Creek spread had produced a greasy pack of cards and was dealing black-jack. A few minutes later Horvell returned, looked at the sleeping man again, then returning to the game he told the others, "I thought the old Mex looked familiar. You all know the old Jack Masters place back in Painted Canyon?"

There was still enough magic in the name of Masters to cause the black-jack players to look up from their cards. "Yeah. What about it?" the dealer asked.

Horvell continued, "Well, I was looking for some strays last spring, and I thinks to myself if I was an ornery beef critter that didn't have sense enough to stay where the grazing was good, where would I go? So I rode over Painted Canyon way."

"And found your critters there?"

"No." Horvell indicated the sleeping man on the other side of the fire. "But when I rode by what's left of the old Masters ranch house I spotted the Mex there on the porch. He must not of heard me until I was almost on him. Then he scurried inside the old shell like a rabbit."

"Oh," Ross said. "It could be they are using the old spread for a hide-out. You see any other signs of life?"

"No," Horvell admitted. "I didn't. But it might pay us, after we hang them, to ride up that way. There are a lot of blind and box canyons up there where they could graze a good-sized herd."

"We'll do that," Ross agreed. Squatting on his haunches, he laid a five-dollar gold piece on the turf. "Deal me in, Cully. And hit me for five dollars."

The dealer considered the coin. "Who do you think I am, Jack Masters? Eight bits is the limit, Ross. Double, of course, for black-jack. Dealer takes all ties. And I'll pay two to one for five cards."

"Piker," Ross grinned. "Okay. Hit me for eight bits. But Jack Masters would have shot the works."

"That's right," the dealer agreed without malice. "But they don't breed men like Masters anymore, including me."

JACK MASTERS—the name hung on the cold night air, it was written in the leaping flames of the fire. Its magic would never die. Legends never do. The dealer had spoken truthfully, up

to a point. Men like Jack Masters still lived, but there were not very many of them.

There were a hundred tales told of him. He could out-drink, out-shoot, out-fight, out-love, any man in the valley. In the early days, with two of his riders, he had stood off fifty Indians. He had fought drought and plague and blizzards without once losing his smile. Men still talked of his way with a señorita, his horsemanship and marksmanship; of the men he had killed and the men who had tried to kill him. They still talked of the empire he had carved out of a wilderness, then frittered away on women and whiskey and cards. They still talked of the night he had lost the last five hundred of his cattle to the elder Ross on a single turn of a card.

"It looks like I lose," he had grinned. "But by damn I could have sworn I'd catch an ace." His last double eagle had tinkled on the bar. "Okay. Set them up for the house, Bill. I'll be back to tangle with Ross, here, when I get another stake."

That had been thirty years ago. But Masters had never returned. He had been too busy cutting wider swaths in other parts. He was heard of in Abilene, Dodge City, Tucson, Central City. He had made a killing here. He had lost a fortune there. He had married the daughter of a wealthy California rancher. He had been killed in a gun fight in the newly incorporated City Of The Angels. He hadn't been killed in a gun fight. Someone had seen him driving a stage coach out of Butterfield.

Then, nothing but the long silence and his legend.

Once upon a time there was a man named Jack Masters. He was ten feet four inches tall in the saddle. He could drink a barrel of whiskey at a sitting and shoot out a gnat's eyeballs at five hundred yards. He wasn't afraid of the devil and in the ranch houses and tall homes on Knob

Hill, sweet-faced, white-haired old ladies still smiled at lavender-scented memories and thanked their God they once had known a man.

"No, sir," the dealer repeated. "They don't breed men like that anymore."

"No. I guess not," Ross agreed. "Of course I was just a shirt-tail young 'un at the time but I mind the stories my grand-pop used to tell. He thought a powerful lot of Jack."

"Cards," the dealer said. "You playing those or you want to be hit?"

Ross looked at his down card. "Lightly. Hit me very lightly."

The night grew older and colder. From time to time a rider rose from the circle to throw fresh wood on the fire. The black-jack game flourished briefly, then died. The excitement engendered by the chase and capture fading, each man drew more into himself. No one made jokes now. There was no horseplay. This was a serious business. With the dawn three men were to die.

Mexican Charlie slept on. The eyes of the red-haired youth continued to try to ferret out possible avenues of escape. The old man grew adept at rolling cigarettes with bound hands and smoked incessantly, offering a cigarette to the youth whenever he rolled one for himself.

An hour before dawn Ross made coffee and offered a steaming tin cup full to each of the three condemned men. The Mexi-

can, aroused from sleep, thanked him graciously, "*Gracias, señor.* There ees nothing like hot coffee on a cold morning, no?"

Ross said, "You're pretty chipper for a man about to be hung."

The aged Mexican shrugged. "Death comes to all men, *señor.*"

Red told Ross to go to hell. He also told him where he could put his coffee.

Under the circumstances, the rancher was patient. The youth wasn't over eighteen. It was right he should cling to life. "Why be that way, son?" he asked gently. "You made a gamble. You lost. Why be a poor sport about it?"

"He's young," Pop said. "Thanks a lot for the coffee, Ross. It was thoughtful of you."

Ross was embarrassed. "Look. I don't like to do this thing. But you fellows know the rules of the game. You want paper and pencil? You want to write a letter to anyone?"

Charlie shrugged. "To whom would I write, *señor?*"

"Go to hell," Red repeated.

"No. I don't think so," Pop said. He seemed about to say more but changed his mind. "No. I don't think so." He looked thoughtfully at Red.

"You keep your mouth shut," the youth said. "To hell with 'em. To hell with these apple knockers. Don't you tell them a thing."

Next time try...

GUCKENHEIMER

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"Okay," Pop said. "Okay."

Dawn grew stronger in the sky. First the painted buttes stood out in bold relief against the lighter gray of morning. Then here and there traces of color appeared. The grass changed from gray to green. The mesquite began to take form. The sage became purple. Early rising quail called from the brush. Yawning riders rolled up their blanket rolls and drank coffee squatted around the fire. Now that the moment was here none wanted to take the lead. The three men deserved to die but under the best of circumstances, hanging three men, two of them white-haired, one of them scarcely more than a boy, wasn't a pleasant thing to do.

As the owner of the biggest spread, the decision was left to Ross. This was his party. The thirty head had carried his brand. He was the man to say when. The golden round of the sun itself was plainly visible over the buttes when he finally got to his feet. "Well, let's it over with." He delegated three riders to make hangman's noses of their ropes, another man to get the condemned men's horses. "We'll put them astride their horses and quirt the horses out from under them. I guess that's the best way."

"I guess so," one of the men detailed to make a noose agreed. "These are the first men that I've ever hung."

The black-jack dealer of the night before yawned. "It's really very simple. Once over lightly, and 'Good morning, God.' But I still can't understand why these birds didn't shoot at us when they had us on the sky line."

"They probably did," Horvell said. "It's just that they're bad shots. You aren't feeling sorry for a mangy rustler, are you?"

"No," the rider said truthfully.

The nooses made and the three ropes thrown over a limb of the cottonwood, Ross urged the men who were to die to their feet. "Let's go, fellows. This is it."

Mexican Charlie looked up at the limb. "So eet would seem. *Hasta la vista, señor.*"

"You've got guts," Ross admitted.

"Thank you, *señor*," the Mexican said simply.

SILENCE settled on the group. The hush of morning grew more intense.

The only sound was the crackling of the dying fire. Then the rider brought the three horses. The nooses were adjusted and, their hands still bound, the three men were helped into their saddles.

Ross said, "This is your last chance if you want to do any talking, boys. The thirty head we caught you with were peanuts. You wouldn't care to say what you did with the other critters, the ones we didn't catch you with?"

The Mexican shook his head. "There were no others, *señor*, at least as far as we three are concerned. Those thirty head we tried hard to steal." He was very unhappy about it. "I am sorry we deed not succeed. They were all good breeding stock. We had great plans for them."

His white lips the only sign of the fear that was wracking his body and tying his intestines in knots. Red said, "Shut up, Charlie." He looked back at Ross. "All right. So you're going to do it. What are you waiting for? Go ahead. Hang us."

His rheumy eyes running in the cold of dawn, scarcely more than an animated scarecrow dressed in cast-off clothing, the old man astride the impatient bay seemed to come to a decision. "I wonder," he asked Ross, "If I could have a last cigarette and time to say a few words?"

"No," Red said. "To hell with them."

"That's right," the old man said quietly. "To hell with them." Ross put a cigarette between his lips and he sucked the smoke deep in his lungs before adding, "But you shut up now, Red. You ain't being brave. You're acting like a spoiled kid. No man wants to die. Besides, this is my party.

It's been my party right along." He looked at Ross. "You wouldn't want to hang an innocent man, would you?"

The rancher was disappointed. "Innocent?" he scoffed. "We caught you running off thirty head."

"That's right," the old man agreed. He sucked hard at his cigarette again, then spat it out. "I stole them cows. Like Charlie said, we had great plans for them." He admitted frankly, "One way and another, picking up a maverick here, blotting a brand there, I aimed to build me up a herd." He was wryly amused. "But either I'm getting old or you fellows were too sly for us. Either your dad or your grandpop would have been ashamed of themselves to batch a simple little cow stealin' job like we done."

The young rancher's face flooded with color. "Now just a minute, old man. You keep your tongue off my family."

"I said it. I meant it," Pop said. "There wasn't a one of us out here in the early days that was above adding to his herd by a cute trick now and then." Ross opened his mouth to protest and the old man said, "No. Shut up. This is my last say. I mean to have it. I stole your cows; hang me. But let Charlie and the youngster go. Anything they did, they did on orders from me. I'm the man you want. You've got me. Hang me and let them go."

Ross shook his head. "I'm sorry, old man. If that's all you have to say—" He lifted his quirt over the bay's flank.

"Hold it," the old man said. "I ain't finished. Hell, I ain't begun."

Something stayed Ross's hand. The old man's voice was fuller. He seemed to have grown tall in the saddle. His eyes were no longer rheumy. The rising sun touched and blotted most of the wrinkles from his face. His shoulders squared. In his time he had been a man.

Settling himself in his saddle, the old man studied the faces of the men about to

hang him. The words he spoke came hard. "This isn't an easy thing for me to do, boys. But I'm doin' it. I'm beggin'."

A growl of disapproval greeted the statement.

"Why all the palaver?" Horvell asked. "Quirt those horses and get this over with."

Not a single rider moved.

"It ain't easy to hang a man, is it, boys?" the old man asked. He answered his own question. "No. It ain't. You can shoot a man in anger. You can lay for him in ambush if your hurt or grudge is big enough. You can kill a man with your fists or most ways that you've a mind to without a twinge of conscience. That is, outside of hanging. Hanging belongs to the law. It means you've set yourself up as judge and jury, that you ain't killing him in anger, but in justice. And justice is a hard thing to define. What's right? And what's wrong? Who's to say?" He paused, continued, "Mark me. Charlie and Red did what they did on my say so. Hang me and let them go."

"No," Ross said. "You're all in this together."

The old man looked over the rancher's head, over the heads of the men behind him, and over the painted buttes behind them into infinite space. "In my time," he said finally, "I've probably done a lot of things to deserve this noose around my neck. In fact I can call quite a few to mind. I've been what some would call a hard man who looked the world and the devil in the face and dared either of them to spit. I been a proud man. When I was hurt I crawled away like a wounded wolf to lick my wounds in private." His voice shook slightly. "And when a man has a pride like that, it ain't easy to beg. But I'm begging you now, boys. Don't make me talk no more. Let Red and Charlie go. Hang me. And let there be an end to this."

Horvell shook his head. "Nothing

doing. One rustler looks like another to me."

He lifted his quirt and Ross said, "Just a minute, Chuck. What's your name, old man?"

The old man smiled. "They call me Pop." He sat even straighter in his saddle. "But I come into this world and this part of the country before any of you were born. I was tilting a whiskey jug and fightin' Indians before any of you was even a gleam in your daddy's eye. I come into the West when it took a man to live here, when there weren't no railroad nigher than five hundred miles away. I fought Indians and blizzards and drought. I come when there weren't no line fences, nor sheriffs, nor county seats."

"He's just stalling," Horvell said. "Hang 'em. Hang all three of them. What's how old he is got to do with rustling cattle?"

"I'm coming to that," the old man said.

HE SAT solid on his saddle, wondering how to go on. How did a man who had been a king explain his fall? How did a man who had been away from it for years explain his hunger for the range? How did a man who had become a legend become a man again? How could a man explain the twisting pain in his heart caused by seeing a grandson of his growing to immature manhood in the reek and filth of the Barbary Coast with all the healing purity of the land just out there on the other side of the horizon where the mountains met the sky? How could a man explain his desire to start all over at seventy to rebuild, not for him-

self, but for his grandson, a small portion of the empire that he once had owned.

"Any of you fellows ever been to Frisco?" he asked.

Several riders said they had.

"I been there fifteen years." The old man made full confession. "Most of that time I been drunk. Drunk because I couldn't abide myself sober and think on the man I had been."

Red said fiercely. "Shut up. Please. I'd rather they hung me."

The old man studied him with approval. "You got pride. You wear it well." He turned back to the watching men. "But me, I'm past all that. For years I been swampin' in a saloon, cadging drinks off would-be gunmen who couldn't hold a candle to the man I had been." He nodded at the silent Mexican. "Charlie was my only friend." His voice dropped in his throat. "Then one day we learned of Red. His ma and his pa were dead. But he was my own grandson, living in a city, not knowing what real living or real men could be." He played it cagey. "So, knowing that no one was living at the old Jack Master's ranch I suggested we come out here, build us up a herd some way and live like real men should live. And here we are."

"With a noose around your neck," Ross said.

"That's right," the old man agreed. "I done wrong. I knew better. But the years were beginning to crowd me. So I took a shortcut—and got caught. The rules say I should die. That's all right with me. But I can't abide to think a mere boy and an old man should have to help pay for my

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folly. I stole your stock, Ross. I aimed to use 'em to build up a herd. Hang me and let them go."

"That might be a good idea," Horvell said.

"No. Wait," Ross said. "Who are you, old man?"

Red's voice was filled with mixed pride and scorn. "Who is he? Why, he's Jack Masters, you fools."

Ross was the first to speak. "Don't give me that. Jack Masters is dead."

"That's right," the old man nodded. He was no longer tall in the saddle. He looked old and tired and without hope. He looked like the man he admitted he was, a rheumy-eyed swamper in a Barbary Coast saloon. "Jack Masters is dead," he mumbled. "Jack would never have let Charlie and Red get into such a fix. Him and your grandpap, in the old days, brought enough wet backs across the creek to make Jack ashamed of himself to get into such a pickle, if he was still alive."

The silence was complete.

Red was almost sobbing. "I'd druther have hung. All he had left was his pride. And as old as he is, there ain't a one of you half the man that he is."

Charlie nodded brightly. "The boy speaks the truth, señors. Or even half the man that I who learned from heem am for that matter." He asked hopefully, "Would one of you care to untie my wreests, geeve me a gun and put this matter to a test?" He spat his contempt. "We need not to be caught. We could 'ave shot many of you. But Jack would not let this be. We are home, Charlie, he tells me. These men are our good friends and neighbors. Eet is just they do not understand we merely eentend to borrow these few cows."

"A likely story, the whole of it," Horvell said. "I say, hang them."

As if speaking to himself, Ross said, "I mind the old man used to talk about a Mex named Charlie who was Jack Masters' shadow."

"Si, señor," the Mexican beamed. "And the shadow grows and diminishes with the man." He looked at the old man proudly. "And the shadow ees still tall." He spat. "So hang us and be damned."

The riders milled uncertainly in front of the three men under the tree. Then Cully Johnson said, "Jack Masters or not, they still were rustling them cows. I agree with Chuck Horvell. Hang 'em. Besides, how do we know he is Masters? Masters was a big, tall, good-looking guy."

Ross looked at the darkening faces, then back at the old man. "He was also a crack shot. And shooting is like riding a horse. If a man can, he can." In sudden decision he cut the rope around the old man's wrists, thrust his own gun into one thin hand, then balanced a gold piece on his bent thumb. "Ready?"

"Ready."

Without seeming to look at the coin the old man raised the gun and sent the tossed gold piece spinning toward the painted buttes with one shot.

Horvell looked at the old man. "He's Jack Masters all right. So what do we do now?"

Ross, too, grew tall in the saddle. "We apologize," he said tight-lipped as he removed the noose from around the neck of the man he had been about to hang. "If he's Jack Masters he isn't a rustler. Those were his cows. The last thing the old man told me just before he died was that he had stacked those cards."

For a moment the old man looked young as the rising sun painted his face. "Well, I'll be damned," he admitted. "I could have sworn I would catch me an ace." He insisted on shaking hands with Ross. "Thanks for telling me, neighbor." Then, looking at Red and Charlie, he grinned, "Well, why are you just sitting there? You've no nooses around your necks. Let's ride. You want someone to rustle our cows?"

GUNS OF HELL'S

The Wild Bunch figured Shorty for their own — until they found that you can lead some gents to boothill — but you can't make 'em die!

By T. C. McCLARY

AT PRECISELY 4:45 A. M. Archibald Ashcroft opened his eyes into the darkness of his hotel room and cursed the unshakable habits of a range-bred youth that had outlived necessity and purpose. Either a man should not grow old, or he should not let ambition lead him into town life, for there was not a damned thing for him to do now for a full two hours.

The very thought was a habit that twenty years of repetition had not dimmed, as was the way he still stretched out trail kinks that did not exist, and the way he lay motionless for a space sensing into the rose-gray dawn beyond the solid black line of the sawtooth hills. Most of life was habit, he considered, and most of what a man might make of life later on could be judged from the habits of his early years.

He swung over the side of the iron bed and moved to throw open the window, pulling wide his flannel nightshirt to bare a still corded chest against the hour's invigorating chill. The town's silence swept in at him, broken only by Calliope Smith's pulsating snore and the distant drum of horses running free in a remuda, but louder than either was the feel of uneasiness and treachery and violence pervading the town's slumbers like a stealthy, eerie sound. Not even in sleep did the town lose its fear of the Wild Bunch, and it crossed his mind that he could recall a time when no door in the county was even shut at

night, but now every door was barred.

He caught a man's low laugh and a woman's murmur and the brief tap of high heeled boots as a door was closed. Then silence, except for a drunk babbling at shadows until Anton's deadfall disgorged the last of its all night crowd.

He recognized Baldy Bledsoe's chesty growl, "Shorty, it is damned lucky for either us or you that you don't ride your poker luck like you ride a hoss!"

And Shorty Converse's careless rejoinder, "Hell, what's the use batting yore brains out over money?"

"Well, boy," Bledsoe chuckled gruffly, "that is strictly yore idea. Me, I like money, and I would bat my brains out any time there is a dollar to be found!"

"Yore brains or somebody else's?" Ray Flint laughed.

There was the rough give and take of late night parting and then the tattoo of hoofbeats running off like spokes into the dawn. The free run of the remuda neared, and from habit, Ashcroft made passing note that it would be six or seven ponies, and later he recalled this and a man's low jeering bark and another man's explosive gasp of pain.

But right at the instant his mind was on the parting. He scowled and nibbled at the underside of a close-cropped, iron-gray mustache, putting what he had just heard into a banker's terms and feeling confirmed in recent judgment. That was

RANGE



Shorty drew and shot, dropping Baldy flat. . . .

wild company Shorty Converse was keeping, but more than that, even with his luck and poker savvy, he was too casual and fiddle-footed to follow up. It was simply not in him to buckle down seriously at anything except some king mustang that had caught his eye and that he was gentling at a given moment. It was a damned shame for he had the best horse savvy on

the range, and there was a crying need in that country for a top rate horse ranch to break up the pirate prices of the horses the Wild Bunch ran in from across the border.

The old man turned to strike a light for his morning shave, wondering why it was always the shiftless that caught the eye of a fine girl like Deecie McCombs. In Ash-

croft's mind, shiftlessness was life's gravest crime.

Ashcroft dressed with methodical care, choosing a string tie and a sober, embroidered vest; and donning his black tail coat, he descended to the lobby at precisely six o'clock. He stepped out into night's last clinging shadows for his morning constitutional, stopping at the blacksmith's and the freight yard, and damning the Administration and politics for naming a postmaster who did not open his store until the slovenly hour of eight o'clock.

With the first streak of direct light he angled across the main drag's still damp dust to Deecie McComb's Eatery for flapjacks, beans, bacon, biscuit, and a side order of steak for ten cents extra if a man wanted. Deecie handed him the Denver paper, only three days old, and putting down his first coffee, allowed in confidence that tomorrow she would have three eggs for him.

"I dunno," he allowed, "how Shorty Converse stays so all-fired small hanging around here all the time!" Ashcroft chuckled.

"Well, don't think he doesn't eat his two bits' worth!" she scowled. She watched Lemuel Wheatley, the hardware man, out the door and then leaned on the counter. She said, "Archy, it is none of my business rightly, but did Shorty bother to come talk with you about staking out a horse spread?"

Understanding broke upon his loose-fleshed face. "So you were behind that?"

She colored and looked quickly away. "Mebbe I shouldn't have egged him on," she murmured. "He said you wouldn't be bothered with it."

The banker blew against his lips, stared at his breakfast and laid down his tools. "Deecie," he told her with consideration, "you can lead a hoss to water but you can't make him drink. There ain't a more likeable fellow on this range, but Shorty don't want to settle down to steady ranch-

ing. He jist ain't got the mettle for it."

She turned to cutting bread. "When he takes a real notion," she said tightly across her shoulder, "he's no slouch, Archy. And there's that buck colt of his comes full stallion next spring. He says it's good enough to sire a fast, heavy shouldered cowpony strain, and—" Her words trailed off.

"He told me about it," Ashcroft allowed dryly. "He said it will win every race it runs this season."

HE SAW the abrupt lift of her head and the sharpening of her compact shoulders. "Racing's a fine test of horse and man," he added. "But it don't leave a man much time for setting up a new spread, Deecie."

"Aw, doggone that fiddle-footed coyote!" she cried hotly. "What's wrong with him, Archy?"

He made a gesture. "I reckon he jist never learned the right habits, Deecie. And a man's habits don't change. He just plain don't like the hard way when he can take the easy."

She swung around then and came at him with determination in her cornblue eyes. "Now," she told him, "you didn't start out with banking habits. You were just an ordinary cowhand, but you changed!"

"Well," he admitted, "yo're right, but it took a whole stampede to knock it into me that cows ain't God's gentlest critters and cow nursing was a mighty risky way to make a living."

Lemuel Wheatley came back in at a fast walk, looking grim. He said, "Somebody stabbed Chris Nailor outside his door last night. He was just back from Tombstone to buy six ponies."

Ashcroft wiped his lips and got to his feet. "He should have come in by daylight," he commented dryly.

"What difference would it have made?" Wheatley demanded on a harsh note. "He meant to sell them, and that bunch would

get him for cutting in on their gravy!"

Deecie's eyes grew large. "What will you do?" she asked them.

Wheatley threw her a good man's look of baffled outrage. "*Talk!*" he grated. "Hold a meeting and talk and do nothing the same as always! Every honest man in the country will know who's responsible, but nobody will have the guts to say it outright!"

"I'll bet—" she started, then bit her lip and held her thought.

But Wheatley read it, and his face filled with mocking anger. He opened his mouth for high tempered expression, suddenly caught the chill silencing look in Ashcroft's eyes, and recollecting that Ashcroft had started as a cowboy and not a townsman, and was also his own banker, restrained himself with effort.

Ashcroft said gently to the girl, "It's all right, Deecie, nobody really thinks he's part of the outfit, but he picks bad company," and nodding at her, turned Wheatley out before the break of her first violent sob. . . .

Day's heat built into a shimmering white-hot glare that failed to halt the funeral, but the appearance of the entire Wild Bunch riding in the procession caused an explosive silence that hung with violence over the grim crowd upon boot-hill. There was an awkward pause, then Wheatley grated out what every man was thinking, "Baldy Bledsoe—" and met the bleak danger in Baldy's and stopped.

Baldy said dead flat of voice, "I'm listening, Wheatley. I'm listening very good."

The townman's angry courage dumped out of him and left him like an empty sack. "None of yore bunch was friends of Chris Nailor's," he muttered lamely.

Baldy's head swung slowly along the crowd. He gave each man there the personal benefit of his tough irony. "We like to pay our respects to a man who was stuck like a pig in the dark," he told them. "This ain't just a question of friendship;

it's a question of who is snake enough to pull a trick like that."

He stopped, and devilish humor whirled upon the surface of his eyes. "The hombre was a snake," he added slowly, "and any good citizen who names a suspect is calling that man a snake, and rightly."

He looked tough and dangerous and bland. He was putting it flat to them that the first rumor involving any of the Wild Bunch would be taken as a personal affront. "That is—rightly so if the speaker can prove it. I'd speak out straight if I had a thought, but I must have been playing poker with Shorty Converse when it happened, or on my way home with Ray Flint and Sooky Murdoch."

Across the crowd, Shorty nodded and said his piece to break the tension. "We played until dawn and it was light when I heard yore yip-yip as you cut into the gulch, Baldy. Chris's woman said she heard him come into the yard and another rider leave while it was still dark. Nobody meant that you might know."

Baldy looked point blank at Wheatley. "You didn't mean nothing like that, did you?"

Wheatley's face was a sick gray. His lips were suddenly slack and wet and formless.

He swallowed hard and slowly shook his head.

Ashcroft cleared his throat and grunted, "Nothing's been said that shouldn't have been. Let's be getting ahead with the funeral."

"Sure 'nough," Baldy agreed softly. "I just wanted to get it straight what Wheatley was aiming at, is all. Nobody in our bunch had anything agin Nailor. I'd have sold him the six ponies he bought down to Tombstone for much less than they cost him."

With one movement, the crowd's attention swung to Nailor's plain board coffin. That was what those six ponies had cost him.

DAY'S heat was still heavy and throttling when Shorty Converse drifted into the Eatery and found Deecie red-eyed and sullen and alone. He hooked his legs around a stool and stared at her with puzzlement. "What are you sore at me for?"

She wouldn't look at him, but said with a woman's angry disturbance, "You know danged well!"

He poked back his hat and sweat trickled down across his face. "No, I don't know," he told her. "I didn't know anybody was thinking of anything but Chris Nailor hereabouts today."

She wheeled on him. Her eyes blazed. "That's just what I am thinking about!"

"Gawdamighty!" he breathed. "You ain't got a notion I had something to do with it?"

"No," she admitted grudgingly. "But you sure been playing around with the bunch that do!"

He flushed with anger. "Aw, stop that, Deecie!" he growled. "I am getting danged sick of everybody blaming Baldy for everything that happens in this town. He was with me, like I said at the funeral. Second place, he ain't like that. If he did have a grudge he'd settle it straight out!"

She muttered fiercely, "Shorty Converse, you are one fool!"

He paled a little at the violence of her anger. "Yo're getting bad as the rest," he rasped at her. "Jist because a hombre has the guts to make a border run now and then, everything he does is wrong! Where in heck do you think all the rest of the stock in this sandtank came from?"

"That's not all I'm talking about and you know it," she flared. "There's been rope haulings and drygulchings and man-brandings, and every other kind of mayhem!"

"Well, he ain't been in 'em!" he snapped.

"He heads the Wild Bunch!" she snapped back.

"They yap at his heels!" he growled.

"He ain't responsible for what they do!"

Her mood switched with a woman's abruptness. Tears drowned the anger in her eyes and misery softened her mouth. "Aw, Shorty," she murmured plaintively, "I'm just thinking of you. Why don't you drop that crowd and get some gumption and settle down?"

But her softness didn't touch him. He was angry now. "Mebbe," he rasped, "because I don't hanker to eat dirt when I don't have to, and mebbe because they're good friends of mine to boot."

She shook her head. "They're nobody's friends, Shorty. And you keep running with 'em and you won't have any friends left either."

"To hell you say!" he snorted. "Baldy's as good a friend as I've got, but I've got plenty more as well!" He glared at her. "Deecie, yo're getting too all-fired respectable," he growled, and moved out stiffly as she cried, "Shorty, even if you've got no gumption, don't be a loco fool!"

He spur-dragged upstreet and stood lounging on a corner, legs spraddled and stiff as a mastiff's ready for a fight, back tight and chest arched like a bow. Men moved about with that grim aimlessness of mass temper without leadership and without form. But their anger was directed at Baldy; it was in the way they watched the street where the Wild Bunch hung out, and the way they looked away when anybody loafed out. He cursed the town through lips stiff as cold putty, and roiled and smarting from his run-in with Deecie, he angled through evening's tinting light to join Baldy and make it clear just where he stood.

Baldy threw an arm around his shoulder and allowed, "Boy, you sure stood up and told 'em!"

"The doggoned idjits!" Shorty growled. Baldy studied him. "Somebody riding you?"

"Somebody who should know better," Shorty grumbled, and took a double shot.

Baldy chuckled knowingly. "They all want to tie a can on yore tail! Don't give 'em a chance, I always say. Ride high, ride fast, and ride alone, and you can lay yore whip across 'em all. You'll get yore chance to crow and strut come the cross country races next Satiddy."

"I'll take that hands down!" Shorty grunted.

"Boy, you better," Baldy grinned, but with a metallic undertone. "We are betting a pocketfull of money on you with the outlanders who don't know no better!"

Shorty had a man's natural reactions and strutted a little, but under it he was boiling. That was Wednesday and by Friday he was drunk enough to hide pride under swagger, and he strolled around to read the riot act to Deecie.

He was in the restaurant when Ray Flint drifted in, and right at that moment she was using a woman's prerogative to turn the tables and give a man hell. "You know danged well the Bunch are putting it out yore hoss had curbyhock and those dirt-poor outlanders who don't know yore pony are betting every last dollar they've got against you!"

Shorty gave an arrogant laugh. "If they're that dumb, what of it?"

"That's their vittle money for a whole year," she told him, so hotly that she did not even notice Ray Flint in the door. "What about their wives and children? At least you could tell the truth!"

She penetrated the alcohol and put-on hardness; she reached the roots of his native honesty and kindness.

"Mebbe I should," he admitted.

She sniffed indignantly. "What you should do is not ride that race tomorrow! That's the only way you can save the poor suckers who've laid their bets."

Flint's eyes hardened. He made a rattle and spur-dragged in. He hooked his legs around a stool and poked back his hat and laid his dangerous gaze upon the girl. "Yo're giving him bad idees," he said.

"It's his hoss; he can do what he wants!" she answered hotly.

"That ain't even bad. That's just a plumb wrong idee," Flint grunted contemptuously. He turned to Shorty. "Baldy wants to see you."

Shorty muttered drunkenly. "I'll be over in a spell."

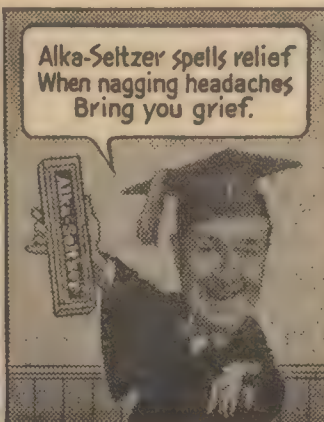
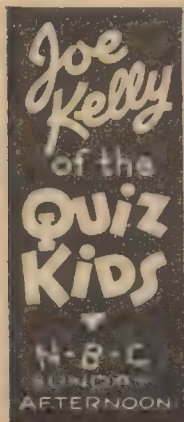
Flint's tone grew edged and purposeful. "Mebbe you'd best come sooner. Mebbe you'd best just come along with me now."

"Don't you dast go over there, Shorty Converse!" the girl put in. "You go down to my house and sleep some of that rotgut off!"

Shorty scowled. "No, I gotta see Baldy," he told her and lurched to his feet.

Flint's face relaxed. He took Shorty under the arm and gave her a mocking grin.

She was calling furiously, "Shorty, you



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go over there and I'll never speak to you again."

"No, I gotta see Baldy," Shorty hiccupped from the doorway. Flint turned to touch his hat.

"It was nice meeting you, ma'am. Shorty's all right. He knows what's best for him," he said.

DEECIE stared incredulously after her man and then came all unstuck with racking sobs. Archibald Ashcroft drifted in and patted her hand paternally. She was all choked up and bursting inside, and had to talk with somebody, so she told him.

He listened, and after a spell he said without harshness, "Well, that is how he is, and nothing changes a man, Deecie. Not that I blame him!"

"But he isn't like that underneath!" she sobbed at him. "He's never done a mean trick in his whole life, Archy."

"He don't have much choice," Ashcroft murmured grimly. "It is better than having the Wild Bunch butcher him."

Flint brought Shorty in and leaned him against the bar. He winked across at Baldy, "Shorty wanted to talk with you. His girl just gave him some ideeas about not riding tomorrow."

Ugly danger struck across Baldy's face like lightning before he put on a false grin. "Sure, sure, Shorty," he allowed expansively. "We all want this thing four square and honest. Come back to a table and we'll take a looksee while we have a drink."

Shorty staggered after him to a table. Baldy poured him a full tumbler. Shorty picked it up and drank unconsciously as his shoulder rolled and he tried to focus. "My hoss never had splints or curbyhock or thrush!" he declared drunkenly.

Baldy's eyelids drooped. "How do you reckon that story ever got around?"

"The Bunch are passing it," Shorty declared.

Baldy leaned slowly forward across the table and laid a flat glance upon him. "You recollect what happened to Chris?"

Shorty tossed off the rest of his drink and nodded.

"Damned shame," Baldy allowed sorrowfully. "But I hear tell he figured he was bigger'n some folks hereabouts." He drew back with a deep breath and sat almost sleepily in his chair. "What was that Flint was saying about you not riding?" he asked with a tone of oiled steel.

Shorty poured himself a slug and tossed it down. "I ain't said anything about not riding," Shorty hiccupped. His eyes suddenly began to glaze. "I aim to ride and win that race, Baldy!"

Baldy chuckled with a mean undernote. He watched the man's senses fading out. "You were always a smart boy, Shorty," he allowed. "But jist keep drifting nice and easy. Don't let a woman lead you into bad habits." His lips gave an ugly twist; his voice turned vicious. "Habits like bucking me!"

Shorty's head dumped forward and fell upon the table. "But my buckskin ain't had curbyhock!" he mumbled.

Baldy came to his feet with a vicious agility and leaned over him. His rope-toughened fingers dug into the other's neck. "What do you aim to do about it?" he grated.

"I'm riding tomorrow," Shorty just managed, and fogged out.

Baldy straightened and stood looking down a brief space with a brutal sneer. Flint growled, "Think he aims to sashay?"

Baldy snorted with contempt. "He couldn't stick with an idee long enough to do it! Can't figure a wrangler as plump yella, but he is plump fiddlefooted."

At midnight, Archibald Ashcroft came to a very undignified decision, and strapping on his old range six-shooter, moved out of his hotel and into Baldy's hangout, a bar he had never visited before. Smoke hung in solid layers from the ceiling. It

looked like the whole country had been sucked into a half-crazed betting fever.

Ashcroft scowled with a banker's feelings of what this would mean to local prosperity and moved through the jostling, sweating, bright-eyed bettors. A grim outrage surged up through him, and he found himself half wishing he were still a wild, don't-give-a-damn cowboy, and twenty years younger. For a space, he had a man's heroic thoughts, then regretfully let them sink into the knowledge that any man who breasted the Wild Bunch tonight would breast them alone.

He saw Baldy read him and the wicked mockery that floated to the surface of his eyes as he nodded toward the table where Shorty was sprawled out cold. Ashcroft thought of Deecie, and disgust for Shorty gorged up in him like the taste of bad food. Even a spineless fiddle-foot could keep from throwing his drunken shame flat in a good woman's face.

He found Wheatley and other better citizens watching the boards, and he stood there watching the fevered betting raise the odds from four to eight and then twenty to one against Shorty's unbeatable horse. It meant bankruptcy for the country, particularly for outland nesters who could least afford it. It meant the Wild Bunch as good as had all the money in the bag, and by its power would be undisputed, and from here on this town would be a flaming hellhole surrounded by a dying and slowly deserted country.

Wheatley rasped with a quivering voice, "By gawdamighty, it would almost be worth the shooting just to tell these loco loons how things stood!"

"They wouldn't believe you," the banker said grimly. "Nobody can tell a bettor anything he does not want to hear except maybe the owner."

He half turned and looked with a frosty contempt at Shorty, who had come to and was at the bar. "And I don't reckon we'll hear from him by the looks!" he added. He

was never a boy to breast anything but a bar, or stick anything but a hoss."

Shorty stood against the bar making circles with the wetness of his glass, no longer drunk, but struggling to pull some elusive thought out of a drunken hour that has passed. The crowd was wild with excitement; men wanted to buy him drinks and talk. But he had locked himself within his thoughts, unhearing.

"A man searching for one moment of real guts in his past," Ashcroft commented as he swung to Wheatley. "Guts are a habit, same as early rising."

ANESTER broke through the batwings, wildly waving a worn, sow's ear purse as he shouldered through the crowd yelling hoarsely, "Ninety-three dollars again that splinted buckskin and I'll make some drinking money! No hoss had curbyhocks could ever run that race full tilt!"

Somebody growled, "Hell's bells, Whit, don't bet every last dime yore family's got!"

Shorty raised his head and turned sideways to the bar. For an instant, the thing he sought for in that drunken fog was almost captured. It showed in the clearing of his gaze, the vitality of action. Then puzzlement came back upon his brow. He gave a man's gesture of inward confusion and turned back to making circles with his glass.

The odds went up another point against him. Then Flint came down bar and grunted contemptuously, "Baldy wants to see you."

The idea clicked. He had come over with Flint in order to see Baldy. He was suddenly alive again; his mind was clear, his body sober.

He looked coldly at Flint. He turned down bar and something definite in his movement brought silence following him like a low wind. The Wild Bunch saw it, but they just grinned with mild curiosity.

Nobody ever thought of Shorty as trouble for he didn't have the habit.

Baldy opened his mouth to speak as he came up, but Shorty beat him to it. He snapped on a flatted note, "Baldy, you aim to call all them bets off, or do I tell 'em?"

Baldy's eyes turned hard and hooded. "Tell 'em what, that you been drunk?" he asked softly.

"Tell 'em," Shorty answered sharply, "how they've been rigged!"

The suck of men's breath went through the room like a single sound. Baldy paled beneath his burn. "Yo're still drunk!" he rasped and his eyes snapped a message. "Take him, Ray!"

Flint's hand dropped toward his gun where he stood behind Shorty. The jab of steel in his back froze him. Archy Ashcroft's voice said sharply, "I reckon this is betwixt Baldy and Shorty, and there are about five hundred other men in here might figure the same!"

Baldy's eyes were mirror slits. He said loudly, "Nothing's wrong here. All bets been made fair and square. The odds made themselves."

"That curbyhock story made them odds!" Shorty rasped. "And boys, it is a heap of wind! I ran my buckskin over the course last week in three hours eight, and that is eight miles faster than the next best hoss can make it!"

Anger was a formless growl like the gathering of a floodhead. Some of the nestors in that room had put up a whole years vittle and medicine money, some had put up all their livestock. There were no words, just the muttering growl of rising anger.

Baldy's face held a dirty gray caste, but he knew his trails and he had guts. "That's a damned lie!" he roared, "And I'll prove it!" and his gun hand dropped.

Archy Ashcroft saw what happened and recognized it for what it was. Baldy was a fighting man and fought by habit. He

fought to survive and now he was not sure he was fighting only one man but might have to turn upon the crowd. So he started to move, to duck and swing aside as he drew.

And Shorty had no fighting habits, so he just stood and drew and shot, and that split second's difference of action dropped Baldy flat as his gun whipped out. His finger pulled one shot into the floor, and Archy's second shot took him in the head, and except for the impact of the bullet, he did not even move.

A numbed silence held the room. Nobody believed it and they waited for Baldy to roll and drop Shorty by some trick. But Baldy sprawled motionless.

The Bunch were pale of face, shocked by the turn of the cards, and uncertain. They might have fought a way out together, but there was nobody to give the order.

Ashcroft broke the rising din with a clipped offer, "Give us the man who knifed Chris, and we will give the rest the chance to ride out!"

From different quarters, five voices barked in unison, "Ray Flint! He turned back from the gulch while Baldy rode on out!"

Ashcroft nodded sternly and signalled good citizens to take over in good order. Shorty still stood just as he had been, looking surprisedly from Baldy's carcass to his gun and back again. He looked around at a clap on the shoulder and muttered "I had to see him and tell him off to his face for Deecie, but I didn't figure to come out on top. I ain't never made a habit of fighting and Mr. Ashcroft told me only men with regular habits win out."

There was a guffaw and calls that set the lamps to swaying, and the banker scowled and colored. "All right," he growled, "you've done proved up and I'll give you that loan!"

"You can make that yore first habit, Shorty!" somebody yelled, but Shorty was already on his way to Deecie's Eatery.

THE GUNS SPEAK LAST—By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

"Bars are bars, mister, and when you got to shoot your way through them it don't matter from which side — law or outlaw!"

Hilson drove a hammering fist to the man's jaw. . . .



MATT HILSON saw it all from where the trail skirted the piñon and slanted down to the grama-coated valley where the ranch house was. He saw the fight from the screaming concealment of the trees, because that was where the posse had wanted him to wait. He hadn't argued with them about

that. There was no pleasure or satisfaction in a man being behind a law-gun when his kid brother was trapped and perhaps shot down as a payroll bandit and murderer. So Matt Hilson held his horse back in the piñon, with attention on the ranch house and bitterness warping his thoughts.

"You always were the wild one, Roy," he murmured. "Spoiled when you were a kid, and spoiled when you got to be a man. You wanted to make yours the easy way, and this is what it gets you."

From this high point Matt Hilson watched the posse tighten its ring around the weather-grayed ranch house. That was his house down there, and Roy's, and it seemed unbelievable that his brother's tracks had led from the powder-blasted safe at the Ophir Mine into this green valley where they had played together as kids. A man had been killed instantly by that blast, and the guns of the outlaws had cut down another guard before the job was finished. Two men murdered, and the tracks of one of the outlaws—Roy Hilson's tracks—had pointed the way through the chaparral to this valley.

"This comes from getting mixed up with Jade Morrell's crowd, Roy. You took up with the wild bunch, and now you'll try to shoot your way free. It's what Morrell would do, and it's what you'll do. How many times did I tell you it would end this way? You don't stand a chance, Roy, not a chance."

The loop of lawmen drew in on the ranch house, steadily and unswervingly, and then the sheriff's tight challenge floated up the slope to Matt Hilson.

"This is all there is for you, Roy. We've got you surrounded, and you're done. Throw down your gun and come out with your hands up. A fight will only make it worse for you."

A window in the house suddenly exploded to the roar of a gun, and one of

the possemen leaped wildly to one side. A rapid sniping broke out from the cut-bank of the creek in front of the house, and under that cover the posse rushed across the clearing. The gun in the window roared once, and again, and a lawman tripped and fell heavily. The gun in the window kept slamming, but Matt Hilson closed his eyes and turned his head. He was sickened by it all, and he couldn't stand seeing any more. . . .

Nora Crane was in the doorway of her dress-making shop when Matt Hilson rode into Rimrock's hoof-carved street. The sun was making its last bow to the day, giving a soft, golden warmth to the lines of Nora's face. She was a tall girl, slender without any suggestion of frailty, a girl who could laugh easily but now was grave and anxious.

Matt Hilson reined in at her store, dismounted, and lifted his hat. Dust sifted from the seams of his shirt as he moved.

"It was Roy," he said.

He watched sadness stir in her clear gray eyes like a deep shadow, and she made a vague gesture with her hand.

"Did they get him?"

"Yes." She watched him steadily, and he knew he would have to tell the rest. "We picked up the gang's trail outside the mine office. Near as we could tell, there were seven of them, but we lost their tracks in the rocks and hard-pan in Pegleg Canyon—all but one set of tracks, and they led us to Grass Valley. Sheriff McAult put a ring around the house, and the posse closed in. There was a little shooting, but not much—Ben Ligett was wounded. They found Roy inside the house, unconscious. He must have tripped while running toward the back door, and knocked himself out." Matt Hilson lifted and dropped his shoulder. "I watched from the trees above the valley."

The sadness strengthened in Nora's eyes and turned them wet. She said bitterly, "Roy is wild, but I can't believe he's

bad. Not bad enough to do murder. Matt, we've got to do something!"

Hilson rolled his hat in his hands, and wondered why it had always been impossible for him to tell this girl the things he had wanted to.

"You love my brother, don't you?"

She looked at him strangely. "I suppose you could call it that."

"Then we'll think of something," he told her. "We'll think of something to do, Nora."

He started to turn away, but she came out of the doorway and caught his arm.

"You must be tired, Matt, and hungry. Let me make you some coffee and something to eat."

He looked down at her, a tall, heavy man with flat cheeks and a sharp shelf of a jaw. His smile was as grim as it was bitter. "I'm hungry, Nora, but I couldn't eat. Not when I've got to figure out something for Roy."

He went down the street, leading his trail weary horse. He was in town again, and being within his jurisdiction he took the marshal's badge out of his pocket and pinned it on. He looked toward the jail, and then moved his eyes to the paint-peeled square shape of the courthouse, and with a sudden lunge of bitter certainty he knew how this would go for his brother.

THE Ophir Mine was a big thing in Fanchon County, and the two murdered payroll guards had many friends in town. An angry temper was already piling up on the town; Matt Hilson could feel it and taste it as he paced along the street.

Roy would be given a fair trial, but with all the evidence against him he would be found guilty and sentenced to hang. There could be no other ending to this, and Matt knew it. And knowing that, a sudden raw hatred for the breed of men who helped bring this down on his brother

lodged like a knife into Matt Hilson.

He halted at the Lucky Ace saloon, tied his horse to the hitchrail, and shouldered through the batwing doors. In here were the mingled odors of whiskey and stale smoke and the lingering smell of unwashed men. This was the town's worst dive, a gambling den and loafing place for the chill-eyed men who followed Jade Morrell's orders. It was this dead-fall that Hilson had wanted to close long ago, but had hesitated to, knowing the danger he would run of bringing the unloosed viciousness of Morrell's gun-crew down on the town.

Three men were at the blackjack table when Hilson entered. They looked up, grinned crookedly, but said nothing. Two men leaning across the bar saw Hilson through the back-bar mirror, and one of them turned. He was Monte Preel, a tall, thick-shouldered man with flat, unblinking eyes.

Hilson raised his voice. "I want to see Jade Morrell."

Monte Preel turned with derisive slowness, his amusement a jeering, challenging thing.

"Well, if it ain't the town's tin-star marshal come to visit us!"

Matt Hilson moved deeper into the saloon, and halted near the bar. He looked at Preel, and felt a surge of reckless temper run hotly through his nerves. But he bit that back.

"I want a word with Morrell, Preel. He'll be in the back room. Go get him."

Preel's grin broadened maliciously, and the derision knotted in his small, dark eyes. "Listen to the tin-star marshal, boys! He walks in here like a half-owner, and starts tossin' around orders."

Hilson's temper lifted and shoved its hot head through his control. He said softly, "You've been riding me too long, fellow."

He stepped forward, and slammed his fist into the big man's middle. There was

a brutal streak in him, and he no longer tried to restrain it. He threw off Preel's clubbing blow, and drilled his right first to the man's heart. Preel shifted to one side, hard hit and with the lust to kill flaring in his eyes; he tried savagely to reach his gun, but Matt Hilson drove in close, slashing out short, battering blows that carried all the weight of his shoulders. He smashed the strength out of the gunman, but he wouldn't let the man fall. He kept driving his blows to the man's body, until Preel's legs sagged and he slowly buckled forward, then Hilson lifted a hammering fist to the man's jaw.

A swift movement at the blackjack table blurred in the edge of Hilson's vision. He caught Preel's shirt, spun violently, and sent the unconscious man pitching headlong into the card table. He pulled his gun, and faded swiftly to one side, his eyes bleak and bitter.

"I'd like nothing better than to put a bullet into you, Reeves. Keep on fiddling around with that gun, and we'll see how hard you'll fall."

He held them there with the threat of his gun until Jade Morrell was brought out of his back office by the noise of the fight. He looked at the gambler, and the heat of his reckless temper drove him on.

"How about this, Morrell? You've got four men here to back you. Do you want to carry this on?"

He was a tall, lean man, Jade Morrell, with slate-gray eyes and a pale face that seldom felt the heat of the sun. A coldly handsome face, and a mocking stare. A man who was proud and cruel, and whose smile was a mechanical curving of soft red lips.

"What's eating you, Marshal?"

Matt Hilson let the gambler have his ultimatum with harsh bluntness. "You're closed down, Morrell. The Lucky Ace is out of business. You've run too much trouble in on this town since you opened up here, and you're through. I hope I'm

making myself perfectly clear to you."

A sheen of virulence brightened Jade Morrell's stare, but it only broadened his smile. "That's a big order for one night, Marshal."

"Not too big for me to see through."

Amused contempt edged the gambler's voice. "That," he said, "remains to be seen, Hilson. I wouldn't push my luck too far, if I were you."

A feeling of rashness poked roughly at Hilson's temper, and he spoke with biting contempt. "You want to argue this out now, Morrell?"

"There's plenty of time, Marshal. Plenty of time later."

"When my back is turned," Hilson sneered.

"Why, yes," Morrell grinned. "It'll be a lot easier that way. All profit, Marshal, and no risk."

Matt Hilson holstered his gun, and for a moment waited contemptuously. A fight was what he wanted, a chance to wreck Morrell's deadfall no matter what that cost him, but as the silence dragged on he knew he wouldn't get it.

"You put a lock on that door and keep it there, Morrell," he said softly. "Ten o'clock tonight is your deadline. Don't let me find your door open when I come around to check you."

Jade Morrell's mocking laugh followed him as he turned and shouldered through the door.

"You will, Marshal—and we'll be waiting for you!"

THERE was a committee of townsmen waiting at the jail office when Matt Hilson walked in, with Sheriff Tom McAult waiting uncomfortably behind his desk. A short, gray man, McAult had left the best years of his life behind, and his rules of conduct were but few: he handed out law enforcement for the county, and Matt Hilson did the same within the limits of Rimrock. Neither

ever interfered with the other, and so it remained for Ben Schuster, who ran the express office, to bring the committee's business to a head.

He came around to face Hilson, a thin black cigar up-slanting between puckered lips. "Tough about your brother, Matt," he said in his slow, ready voice. "We want you to know we're mighty sorry it was your brother who got into that trouble."

Hilson looked sharply at the merchant, but he could read nothing in those dark eyes. He never could. He nodded, and that was his reply to Ben Schuster.

He crossed the office to his desk, took a key from his pocket, and unlocked the drawer. He removed the ring of cell keys, locked the drawer again, and straightened. There was something hostile in the room that he only now began to sense. He looked at Sheriff McAult, but McAult was scowling at the plug tobacco he was shaving with his knife.

One of the committee of townsmen cleared his throat nervously, then averted his gaze when Hilson swung a glance toward him.

Matt Hilson said sharply, "What goes on here?"

Ben Schuster got out of his chair, and put his lean buttocks against the edge of the sheriff's desk, looking uncomfortably at Hilson. His smile was little more than a grimace.

"Going in to visit your brother, Matt?"

Matt Hilson understood then. It came into him as sharp as a blade and as bitter as gall.

"Ah," he muttered. "So that's it! You're afraid I might slip Roy a gun or turn him loose."

Ben Schuster took the cigar out of his mouth, stared at it a minute. "It ain't exactly that, Matt. It's just that—" He couldn't find the word he wanted. He kept staring at his cigar, and anger suddenly twisted his face, and he slammed

his cigar down angrily onto the floor.

"Dammit, I never liked this job in the first place, but it's always me who's got to do the talking for these jelly-mouthed toads." He raised his stare and spoke plainly. "You've been law in this town for a long time, Matt, and everybody trusts you—but just the same the town would feel better if you visited your brother under the same conditions as any other man would have to. Locked in, and without your guns."

Matt Hilson's smile was thin and bitter, with only the faintest trace of dry mockery. He shucked his guns, caught McAult's eye, and tossed the sheriff the keys.

"Hell," McAult swore roughly, "I'm on the outside of this deal." He handed the keys to Ben Schuster.

Schuster started toward the door to the cell block, jerked around with sudden resentment, and shoved the keys into the hands of Jack Dills, who ran the general store.

"This was your idea, Dills. I've done the talking for you, but by damn you'll do the rest."

They locked Matt Hilson in the cell with his brother, and for a moment there was only silence between the two men. Light slanted through the bars from the outer ceiling lamp, throwing Roy's face into a pattern of deep shadows and sharp highlights—a handsome face, boyish and spoiled. The face of a man who had had his own way too much when he had been a boy and who had grown up wilful and wild.

Matt said softly, "Kind of a tough jam you're in this time, Roy."

The boy got up from the cell cot, and planted his wide shoulders flat against the wall. There was a strange glint in his eyes, something intent and searching. There was no longer the rash bravado that his eyes had once held. He had been sobered by what had happened to him, and yet there was something deeper than

that which was tightening his fixed stare.

He said in a slow, feeling tone, "You're my brother. You're the law here, but you're still my brother. What are you going to do about me?"

Matt Hilson opened his big hand, closed it. He spoke tonelessly. "What do you expect me to do?"

"What any other brother would do. Slip me a gun and help me break out of here."

Matt moved his heavy shoulders. "I've considered that."

The boy's eyes were hard, insistent. "Well?"

"The answer is no, Roy." Matt brought his fists up and pressed them together until the tendons stood out white along his wrists. "It wouldn't work, Roy. You broke the law when you got into this trouble, and I'd be doing the same if I helped you out. I tried to warn you about Morrell's crowd, but now it's out of my hands. I'm sorry as hell."

His brother stared at him in a long moment of silent, bitter unbelief. Then anger bit into his face, and turned his voice harsh and raw.

"I might have known it! You've rode law for this town for five years, but when the pressure was on they didn't trust you to keep your guns and let yourself in here. But that don't change anything with you. You're still the duty-bound hellion on the big horse, and to hell with what happens to your own brother. All right, Matt! That's good enough for me. I don't need any help from you. I've got friends who'll stand by me in this, even if you won't."

He made a savage motion with his hand. "You never bothered to ask me whether I rode with that gang today or not; you just took it for granted. Get out of here, lawdog! This was a nice clean cell until you walked in."

Moonless darkness had slipped down on the town when Matt Hilson walked out

of the jail office. He looked down the street with a feeling of savage impatience, and saw that the doors of the Lucky Ace were still open. He looked at his watch, and cursed the hour and a half that still remained before the ten o'clock deadline that he had given Jade Morrell. He couldn't do anything to help his brother, but when the time came he would slam shut the doors of the deadfall that had started Roy along this trail to the hangman's noose.

He rolled a cigaret with stiffened fingers, sealed it, and struck a match to the tobacco. He pulled smoke deep into his lungs, but it was flat and tasteless.

He looked along the street again, no longer finding anything in the town to interest him. Any usual patrol he might make of the streets and alleys would be a futile waste of time tonight, for he knew Jade Morrell would have all his men pulled into the saloon to wait for the showdown. Still Matt had to have something to do to relieve the impatient energy that was in him.

HE TURNED down the street, came to the alley that flanked the jail, and started across it. Some sound, so indistinct that he was not certain that he had heard it, came to his ears and halted him. He turned toward the alley, probing the darkness with narrowed eyes. Had some vague shadow moved back there? He wasn't sure. He bent to skyline the side of the jail wall, and he saw the indistinct movement of something below his brother's cell window.

He called out, "Hey, you!" and reached for his gun.

Flame stabbed out of the darkness up there, and he felt the hot wind-whip of the passing bullet. He jerked his gun and fired, but he could no longer make out the gunman's shape. He stepped to one side, bent low, and a second bullet breathed harshly into his ear.

He remembered the glowing tip of the cigaret still in his mouth, and cursed softly. He took the cigaret out of his mouth with his left hand and held it out at arm's length, as he ran forward three paces and halted.

The gun lashed out at him again, this time from further up the alley. He angled his Colt around, fired once and a second time. He heard a man's sick cry of agony, and started grimly forward. Then the killer's gun began crashing out at him, raking the alley with the desperation of a hard-hit man. Matt Hilson fired at the red flashes, and knew that he had missed. He took another step forward, and something hit him in the head. Lights rocketed through his brain, burned out abruptly, and after that there was only silent blackness. . . .

A man's voice said as though from a great distance, "He used up his share of luck this time. A fraction to one side, and he'd have traded his badge in for a harp. As it is, he was only creased."

The words reached down into the well of blackness, and Matt Hilson gripped them one by one and pulled himself back to consciousness. He opened his eyes, and found himself stretched out on the floor of the jail office, with Doc Ellenby bending over him.

"What happened, Doc?"

The doctor's clear blue eyes sharpened, and he frowned. "Don't you remember?"

It came back to Matt Hilson like frayed threads dragging loosely through his mind. "I was crossin' the alley when I thought I heard someone beside the jail. I called out, and there was some shooting—"

Doc Ellenby smiled, and the anxiety drained out of his eyes. "For a moment I was afraid you'd lost your rockers, but you're all right. If you remember that much, you'd get the rest soon enough. You happened past while Monte Preel was slipping a gun through the bars to

your brother. Preel cut loose on you, but he ran out of luck. He's dead, and you ain't. That's about all, Matt."

Hilson sat up on the floor, and the movement set trip-hammers to work on his brain. He wondered for a moment if he was going to be sick, and pulled air deep into his lungs. He looked at Sheriff McAult and the tight knot of townsmen, but there was nothing readable in their faces. He brought his gaze back to the doctor.

"What about my brother and that gun Preel slipped him?"

Doc Ellenby looked quickly away, and fear slid its icy hand under Hilson's heart.

"What about my brother, Doc?"

Ellenby spoke with bitter gruffness. "Roy used the gun to make his break out of jail. There wasn't any shooting, but his bluff was just as good. We ain't found him yet, but then we haven't had any time to hunt since we found you outside. When the time comes, I reckon we'll know where to look."

Jade Morrell's Lucky Ace saloon! There was no doubt in Matt Hilson's mind about that. Morrell's saloon would be the first place for Roy to go. It was Morrell's man who had slipped Roy the gun that had given him his freedom, and it was Morrell's gun-crowd who would offer him the protection he needed.

Hilson pushed to his feet and leaned against the wall while the room steadied itself. He felt better after that, with strength returning to his legs and arms. His head ached where the bullet had grazed his temple, but the bitterness in him and the sense of implacable impatience was greater than any feeling of pain. He punched the exploded shells out of his gun, and refilled the chambers. He looked up to find Sheriff McAult at his side, tight-mouthed and bleak.

"Jade Morrell?"

Hilson nodded. "I gave him orders to shut down the Lucky Ace." He looked

around at the wall clock. "He's already running past his deadline. This is my job, McAult."

"I've got an interest in that jigger, too," the sheriff said grimly. "It was his gang that robbed the Ophir safe, even if I haven't got the proof against him."

Matt Hilson shook his head. "It's my job, McAult. You stay out of this."

He turned, went through the door, and out into the night. The air was chill at this hour, and only the tinny racket of a piano and the brassy singing of a saloon girl in the Lucky Ace gave life to the town. There was no sound of men's voices, and because of that Hilson knew Jade Morrell had his gunmen ready and waiting.

HE TURNED down the street, walking steadily. He neared the saloon, saw a man's face slide past the inner surface of a window, and knew his coming had been witnessed. He stepped across the plank walk, hit the winged doors with his shoulder, and walked in.

The saloon girl stopped singing. The music of the piano dribbled into silence, and at one side a man smothered a nervous cough and waited. There were men along the walls and men watching him from the bar. Jade Morrell stood at the end of the bar, smiling and mocking, with Roy Hilson beside him.

Matt looked at his brother, and made a meaningless move with his hand. "Clear out of here, Roy."

Roy shook his head slowly, his mouth a bitter slash above the tight shelf of his jaw.

Matt Hilson raised his voice harshly. "You've got something to know, Roy. I didn't ask you if you rode with that gang today because I figured you'd tell me if you hadn't. That doesn't mean anything now. You broke jail, and that puts you on the wrong side of the fence. I'm here to close this place, but I don't want to

kill you. You just clear out of here."

Roy Hilson didn't move. A frown creased his forehead, of uncertainty or of anger, but he didn't move.

Jade Morrell said malignantly, "What the hell! This town is yours, boys—take it!"

A killer, hidden in the shadows of a deep corner, raised his drawn gun and fired. Matt Hilson felt the sharp burn of the bullet across his ribs as he faded to one side and jerked his Colt. He sent a bullet into the corner, and then there was no longer any sense in picking his target. There were guns all around him, leaping and roaring, and there were guns in the hands of Sheriff McAult and the townsmen raking out the windows and adding to the inferno.

Hilson swung toward Jade Morrell, and pulled the trigger. He missed, and saw the gambler dodging around the end of the bar, firing savagely. Hilson threw another bullet at the man, and from the corner of his eye saw his brother leap to one side and start toward the front door in a running half-circle.

Why, Hilson thought, he's coming to back me in this!

A bullet roared out from the end of the bar, from Jade Morrell's gun, tripped Roy, and dropped him heavily. Matt swore an oath that he never heard, and plunged across the room. He rounded the end of the bar, and Jade Morrell was crouching there, waiting. He fired, and saw the red flare of the gambler's shot. He fired again, and his bullet kicked Morrell's shoulder around. The killer kept turning, as if trying to complete the circle, and then the muscles of his body loosened and he sagged face down on the floor. . . .

They stood in Seth Ellenby's office and listened to the dry grumbling of the doctor.

"Seems like all I do any more is plug up bullet holes in Hilsons. First it was Matt, and now it's his brother. You'd

think they figured they had a corner on my services."

He tied the last bandage into place.

"Now you can go ahead and finish what you were saying," he said gruffly. "You'll be all right in a couple weeks, but don't stretch out your talk too far tonight. You need rest."

Matt looked at his brother, waiting. The brashness was no longer in Roy's eyes, and Matt thought: *He grew up tonight. He was a spoiled brat before, but he's his own man now.*

He listened while his brother talked. "I'm not trying to ease my way out of anything," Roy said. It was a clear, steady voice. "I planned to ride on the Ophir job with Morrell's gang, and I admit it. I thought the easy money was my kind of life. But at the last minute I heard Morrell order his men to murder the guards so there'd be no witnesses against them. I balked then. Someone knocked me out, and that's all I knew until I woke up with the sheriff's posse coming into the ranch house."

Sheriff McAult spoke grimly. "You had a hot gun in your hand when we found you."

"Whoever did the shooting at you put it in my hand," Roy said levelly. "One of Morrell's men knocked me out and left a trail to the ranch so you'd come after me."

Sheriff McAult was a hard, stubborn man. "Can you prove all that, Roy?"

Roy Hilson's smile was wry. "I was unconscious when you caught me, and Monte Preel was dead when I broke jail. I found a brass coat-button in my hand when I woke up at the ranch, and you'll find it in my shirt pocket, sheriff."

McAult rubbed his weathered jaw with a calloused hand. Then he growled softly. "Hell, then the only thing we've got against you is the jail break." He looked around at Matt Hilson.

Matt looked at Ben Schuster and read a smile in the man's eyes.

"I'm head of the town council, so I ought to throw a little weight around here," Schuster said. "If I can't make them pass an ordinance which will say that Roy didn't break any law when he broke jail tonight, then I'll sure enough quit my job pronto."

Matt looked down at his brother, and grinned.



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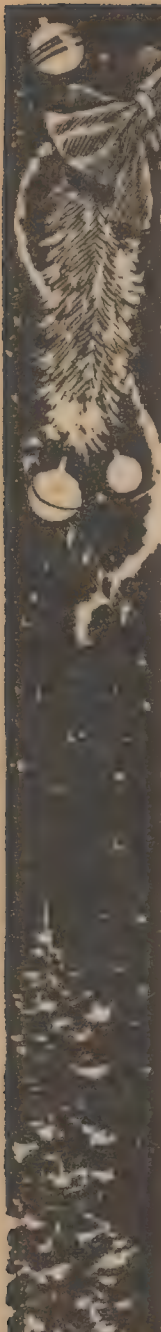
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JANUARY

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**ALL-STORY
WESTERN**



Nesters' Christmas Dance

A Christmas dance was held one year on Chupadero Forks,
Without no red-eye bottles and without no poppin' corks.
'Twas nester folks that called it, but the word had got around
To every ranch and cowcamp where a cowboy could be found,
That cowpokes would be welcome at the school house down the draw
To trip the light fantastic to the "Turkey In The Straw."
In every camp and bunkhouse on the cow range thereabouts
This news provoked some argument. There seemed to be some doubts
About the due propriety of cattie-workin' hands
A-mixin' up with nesteroos that plowed up grazin' lands.
"Now 'just because it's Christmas," said Long Tom, "that ain't no sign
I've got to let sod-busters think their breed's as good as mine!"
"You said it, Tom!" vowed Big Padoo. "We've poked too dang much cow
To start in socializin' with them corn-and-beaners now!"
"Well, I dunno," said Bill Maglone, "I sorter like to dance,
And I purt near always do so when I'm offered half a chance!"
"To hell with nester shindigs!" was the growl of Cotton Pete.
"They homestead on our water an' they live on stolen meat!"



by S. Omar Barker



*They throw up bobwire fences an' they plow up all the grass
To raise their puny little crops of kids an' garden sass.
Then when it comes to Christmas an' they've got a dance to throw,
They need a cowboy fiddler—so they ask us all to go!"*
*"Well, boys," grinned freckled Bill Maglone, "you've let off lots of
steam
About them red-necked nesters that you hold in low esteem.
We all admit they crowd the range, an' some will steal a beat;
They sure ain't horseback people, but it's my mature belief
That when it comes to Christmas and they throw a big ol' dance,
You'll find it full of cowpokes in their dress-up Sunday pants!
Us buckaroos and nesters may not use the same corrals,
But when it comes to dancin'—they're the ones that's got the gals!
We do a heap of growlin', but I'll bet a purty hat
We'll every dang one be there at that dance out on the flat!
For when it comes to Christmas, there's a spirit in the air
That makes range feuds seem foolish—when we know there's women
there!"*



"Stop right where you are, Gill," he snapped. . . .



"A body has to stand for law an' order, Gresham. If you don't believe me—why, these guns will make you one!"

FRED GILL was the jumpiest man in Redhill valley. He had been living with fear a long time—fear of a decision he knew he would have to make one day soon. Now, sitting twisted in his saddle on a little knoll above patchgrass

on which two hundred of his young beeves grazed, watching the riders loping unhurriedly up to him, he knew the time for that decision had arrived.

A man's mind is a funny thing. In private, with leisure in which to think, it

FAST IRON MAN

By **TOM W. BLACKBURN**

builds thoughts as a man wants them built. But when the pressure is on and a man is short of time, his mind thinks according to its own pattern. For an instant, watching Ike Gresham and his riders approach, Fred Gill saw himself hauling his rifle from its boot, coolly levering a shell into its chamber, and knocking Gresham from his saddle. He saw himself iron-hard, and giving Gresham and his men no more chance than they gave the ranchers of Redhill valley. Seeing himself in his mind's eye doing this, standing on his rights and his own two feet, he knew that this would do the trick. With Gresham dead, the slow, inexorable squeeze the man was putting on the valley would be done.

But it was one thing to think of things like this and another to put them into practice. Ike Gresham's stooped body, his quiet manner, his colorless appearance, were all deceptive. Ike Gresham was the devil's kind, ruthless as fire and as swift as a passing second.

The valley had been misled by the man when he came in, alone at first, putting himself up at an abandoned nester's cabin well out on the flats and minding his own business. When his crew began to filter in they, too, were quiet, carefully avoiding trouble. Even now, when these men had their hands deep into the entrails of every rancher in the valley, Gresham and his boys managed to keep wholly at peace with the law. And they had become a lethal force against which no sane man could stand.

Fred Gill did not touch the butt of his booted rifle. He kept his hand well away from the gun belted at his waist. He let there be defiance only in his voice as Gresham and his men pulled up a couple of yards away.

"I don't like people taking short-cuts across my land," he said. "It's posted. Maybe you didn't notice."

Gresham smiled apologetically.

"Guess I didn't," he said. "Sorry. That's the trouble with a man who owns land. He can take precautions, but things he doesn't figure on sort of happen, anyway. Ever notice that, Gill?"

Fred Gill thought about the causeless fires which had destroyed more than one barn on the land of stubborn men in the valley. He thought of riders mysteriously shot from saddle. He thought of good stock run on the flats until it was worthless. He thought of poisoned wells and lone men found beaten to within an inch of their lives by men they did not see.

"Trouble seems to be moving your way, sort of," Gresham went on. "Thought you might like to know. Kind of a neighborly warning."

"Keep talking," Gill said grimly.

"Nice little spread you've got here," Gresham continued appreciatively. "Come four or five years and you'll be pretty well off, looks like. If you don't have an accident or two. Accidents can set the best man back. And a man's luck can turn any time. Wouldn't want to see that happen to you, Gill. Like to give you a hand, me and my boys. Like to guarantee no accidents inside your fence. All friendly. For a little fee, of course. We got to eat, too—"

"Now you got your loop shook out, how much you want?" Gill asked stiffly. Gresham looked reflectively at the cattle on the patchgrass.

"First-class stock," he murmured. "At going prices, maybe two thousand dollars right there in that one bunch, eh? Two thousand dollars—if they didn't stray and you got them to market. I'm a reasonable man, Gill. A hog chokes himself off sooner or later. Me and the boys don't want more than a modest due. About five hundred dollars will guarantee your luck. Same as about twenty head of your beeves. All in old bills—half twenties, the rest tens and fives. I'll be in Redhill tomorrow morning. Get it into my hands pri-

vate-like before noon and we'll get along right neighborly."

This was not as big a bite as Gill had anticipated. In spite of his anger, he felt relief. It showed on his face. Ike Gresham nodded approvingly.

"Good boy," he said. "Now, you understand this is strictly between us. Me and the boys can't back our guarantee to keep trouble away from you—we can't stand by our promise not to come back on you again, if talk was to start getting around."

Gill understood. He had wondered about this. Gresham had been chewing on some of the bigger holders in the valley for months. He was sure of this. Yet he had heard nothing concrete. Those who might have had conversations like this with Gresham would not admit it. In fact, they went out of their way to deny understanding of any hints dropped in their presence. It made sense, now. Gresham's soft talk had teeth in it. A man who discussed this in public would not last long. Gresham had to keep clear of the law to continue to operate, and he would use strong measures to see that no concerted proof could be worked up against him. If his victims would not talk, no one else would be able to do so.

Clint Barney, for instance. There had been a small fire at Barney's place—a bin in which he had stored some feed grain. Barney had ridden down to see Gill one evening. He had talked in circles about the trouble in the valley, hinting that some of them ought to get together in a sort of vigilante movement. Barney had taken a bad fall from his horse on the way home that night. A fall which bruised almost every square inch of his body. When he could sit saddle again, he had come back to Fred with the nervous request that their earlier conversation be forgotten. Barney was the kind of a rider who never took a fall. Ike Gresham and his boys had beaten hell out of the rancher. But it was not a

thing which could be proved definitely.

Gill looked at Ike Gresham and the silent wolves beside him and he nodded slowly.

"Five hundred in small bills, tomorrow morning," he agreed.

Gresham smiled paternally, spoke sharply to his boys, and the lot of them wheeled, riding unhurriedly away across Fred's grass.

THE night which followed was very long. Fred Gill had a fighter's instincts. Warring against them were a sane man's desires to live healthily and in peace. There was something ugly and self-destructive in the thought that he had sat without defiance, listening to Ike Gresham take five hundred dollars of money he needed badly himself. There was something which left a thick, angry taste in his mouth in the thought that he had been on his own land, bought and paid for with honestly earned money, listening without protest to the demands of a thief. But there was also something good in the knowledge that he was making his peace with the only trouble he faced in this country. There was something good in the knowledge that for five hundred dollars he could buy the right to prosper.

A crawling man's solution to a problem. Fred Gill knew this. But a wise man's solution, also, he told himself. To stand against Gresham and his tight, ruthless little organization was to ask for sudden death, and no man wanted to die.

At the bank in Redhill in the morning, Gill endured the close scrutiny of Jaeckel, the banker, as the man brought the packet of bills for which he had asked—a knowing, prying, condemning kind of scrutiny. Fred knew the little man in the alpaca coat had cashed a number of withdrawal drafts, as suddenly and inexplicably presented as his own. He knew that in Jaeckel's mind was stored the identity of

other ranchers who had made these withdrawals and the amounts they had withdrawn. He knew that he could get these names from the banker. And afterward he could approach each of the men who had paid Ike Gresham money. They could band together and they would be a formidable force. Perhaps strong enough to break Gresham's back.

There was only one deterrent. In breaking Gresham's back, the backs of some of their own number would be broken. Several of them. And a man could not tell when he would draw the straw with the bloody end in a thing like this. A man could not tell who would die. And five hundred dollars in old bills was a cheap price to pay for the right to live.

Shoving the manila envelope of currency in his pocket without checking its contents, Gill nodded abruptly to Jaeckel and left the bank. Gresham and his men had not come in yet. He saw Clint Barney's horse in front of the barbershop and assumed his neighbor was getting a shave. Kind of a peculiar thing. A man as busy as Barney was on his spread wasn't likely to take a weekday off in town, even if his whiskers had grown to his knees and the razor at his house was busted in four pieces.

The front door of the Trail saloon was open to let in morning air. Instead, it let out the slightly sour smell of whiskey-soaked sawdust. The smell prodded something in Gill and he decided he wanted a drink. He turned into the place, acutely conscious of the manila envelope bulking his jacket pocket.

The Trail was empty of trade. The swamper had apparently gone out back on some errand. There was only one person in the big room. A gaunt, faded-eyed, gray-haired man who sat sprawled in a chair behind the corner table. A man with a star pinned to the front of his patched shirt. Gill eyed him with hostility for a moment, then eased with a sense of shame.

In that moment he had been thinking that old Bert Maguire was the law of Redhill and that Gresham was his problem—not the problem of ranchers like himself. That was unfair. Maguire was not a free agent, as each of the ranchers was. He could not shape his own idea of right and wrong as Fred Gill could do. He was bound by the written law legislators and the town council had seen fit to put in the books. He could not go beyond it. And no one, even the injured ranchers themselves, could prove a broken law against Gresham's crew except for the extortion clamped upon them—and none dared to testify to this.

Gill hooked up a bottle standing on the bar and moved toward the marshal's table. He had liked Bert Maguire in the days before Gresham's arrival, when one man could afford to like another in the valley. Maguire had served the town well, for the scant hundred a month and the meal ticket at the grimy Chinese restaurant which represented his pay. Maguire kept the town clean. He did it quietly and surely. Not a dozen men in town knew of the reputation he had made in the Kansas rail towns two decades before.

Gill thought Ike Gresham had known about Bert's reputation before he ever moved into Redhill valley. He also knew Bert was old. And he knew about the old man's stiff leg and his fading eyesight. Gresham would have paid a great deal of attention to details like this.

Fred poured the marshal a drink from the bottle in his hand and dropped down into an opposite chair.

"Been looking for you to come in for about a week now, Fred," Maguire said quietly. "But not the way you came in today. Thought you'd hammer down the street, tall in your saddle, madder than a swindled widow and aiming to do something about it. A man has got to have wiggles in his back to crawl on his belly. I didn't figure you did. I figured if there

was one man in this valley that cast a man's shadow, you were him."

"Why me?" Fred growled. "There's bigger men than me on this grass—men with bigger holdings."

Bert Maguire pushed his toes out from under the table and looked at them.

"Let's understand each other. I know why you came to town today. I know why you've got an edgy temper and what you've got in that fat pocket. I know who you're aiming to meet."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Fred said flatly.

"Sure, just like the others," Maguire agreed. "All right. Now we'll talk about a man's size. Weight don't measure it. Nor fenced acreage. Nor a balance in the bank. Backbone and heart and the ability to see straight when there's sand in the air are the real measurements, boy. Up to now, I'd have taken money from all comers that another twenty years would see you kingpin in this valley and a known man in the whole state. I'd have bet high that men like Tom Fearson and Barney and the other big ones now would all be gone and forgotten, that you'd have their land as well as your own—all come by honestly and with hard work."

"Maybe I will yet," Fred said stubbornly. "Gresham won't last here twenty years."

Maguire shook his head.

"That's where you're not thinking straight, boy," he protested. "I'll go along with any man that wants to save his skin, that wants to buy himself room to be happy in. But he don't dare go beyond that—and when he makes a deal, he's got to look it over clean to the end. You part with what you've got in your pocket there today and you've cut your own throat cleaner than I could do it with a razor."

"I'm not bleeding," Gill said thinly.

"Inside, where it doesn't show," the old man contradicted quietly. "You think you're buying security. That's one thing

money can't buy. And men like those you're about to deal with have their own rules. I've seen this kind of thing worked before. A careful avoidance of a clash with the law. An easy chew the first time, with a promise it'll be the last. From then on it's by timetable. Back again and again, until they've cleaned out those they're operating against, right down to their land and the shoes on their feet. By fall, Ike Gresham is going to have title to a big portion of this valley, your land included."

FRED GILL shook his head. This was like listening to the involuntary working of his own mind, and he didn't like it. He had reasoned this out. He had to be right. There was only one way this could be handled, and that was without making a stand.

"He'll trip up somewhere along the line," he said. Old Bert Maguire smiled wearily.

"I tell you I know these things," he repeated. "There's risk, of course, but it comes right in the beginning. Risk that you and your neighbors might tell those wolves to go to hell—risk that you might bunch together and rear back on your hind legs and claw the hell out of them. Once most of you have knuckled down the first time, that risk is gone. A man that lays a-purpose down on his belly don't ever get up again."

"Where's your own hind legs?" Fred asked savagely. Maguire breathed deeply.

"One of them was shot to hell twenty years ago because I shoved my nose into something like this, boy," he said wearily. "I've been working since this outfit showed up. Cutting every square inch of the country about here for a line I could use to trip them. But they're smart as lobos and their boss is the smartest of the lot. When they come to town, every last man behaves. They see holes before they step into them. Take three days ago. They were in town for supplies. A nester up-

valley named Jorgenson faced them on the walk, singled out one of them, and burned into him for mistreating his daughter."

"You could have used that," Gill said accusingly.

"Sure," Maguire agreed. "Except that right there on the street Ike Gresham cut his own boy's face to pieces with a quirt for disobeying orders, shoved him on a horse, and told him to quit the country permanent. He went, too. Gresham stepped into a store and bought the girl a new dress for a present—passed it across with a full apology."

"That's going a long way to avoid trouble," Fred conceded.

"Just a detour," Maguire grunted. "I picked Jorgenson up this morning in the brush beside the county road near his place with his skull caved in. Been dead two-three days. His place is stripped and the girl is gone. No sign. Nothing to work on. Gresham is just getting started. He'll set neighbor against neighbor before he's through. He'll have the whole valley upset until no two men can get together to stand against him. That's what it'll be. The way I see it, while there's two of us who can stand together, we'd better make the try. Tomorrow will be too late."

"We?" Gill grunted in astonishment. "You and me against that wolf-pack? You crazy, Bert?"

"Maybe. And an hour from now I might be dead. What's the difference?

There's a ticket for every one of us, somewhere, sometime. A man doesn't walk this vale of tears just to eat and breathe. There are other things he's got to do. Sometimes they're for himself; sometimes they're for others. It all adds up to the same thing when the scales finally get balanced. One man standing against Gresham when he comes into town wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance. There's too many of them and their attention would be focused only in one place. The way I see it, two would divide their attention and give both men a chance. If Gresham was knocked down, the rest would cave fast enough. I know their kind. What keeps them standing tall and tough is Gresham's backbone. Take that away from them and they wouldn't have the sand of mangy curs."

"It's your idea, Bert; you handle it," Gill said. "Get yourself a deputy."

"Don't need a deputy," the old man said quietly. "I just need another man to walk with me. A man with the sand to see what's right and what's wrong, without counting anything else in."

Desperation was rising in Fred Gill. Bert Maguire spoke more eloquently than had his own mind last night. He felt his determination and conviction of rightness tottering. He bolstered it harshly.

"You tolled me into this talk—easy at first, and then faster. You don't actually know what I've got in my pocket. I don't maybe know what you're talking about.

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And you sure as hell don't know what I'm going to do in the next hour."

"No," Bert Maguire conceded slowly.

"No. That's right; I don't."

The old man pulled himself up, nodded, and left the Trail at his gimpy stride. Gill moved back to the bar. A few minutes later the batwings slatted and Clint Barney came into the saloon. He nodded sourly to Gill, saying nothing. Fred's eyes stayed on him. Barney was wearing a canvas hunting coat. The tip of a manila envelope was visible above one of its pockets. Fred stared at it. Barney had been one of the first approached by Gresham, if a man could believe a whisper of gossip and indications. That had been weeks ago. But Barney had been to the bank again. He had another envelope in his pocket. Maguire's words came back—Maguire's assertion that a guarantee from a man like Gresham meant nothing and that things would move by a timetable, one bite after another.

Gill put down his drink, half-finished, and started along the bar toward his neighbor, a harsh question on his lips to which he meant to have an answer. He was checked by the sound of horses on the street and swung hurriedly toward the door. He heard Barney behind him, moving in the same direction. He pushed the door open. Ike Gresham and his men were riding into town. They pulled up and unhurriedly dismounted before Dawson's store, across the street.

WHEN Gresham and his men were about midway across the street, a tall, slightly limping figure stepped out of a doorway to Gill's left and stepped down into the dust, moving with an exact duplicate of the unhurried steadiness apparent in Gresham and his three men. Gill swore with startled anger under his breath. Bert Maguire was being a damned fool. Gresham pulled up, a flicker of surprise crossing his impassive face.

"Do you want something, Marshal?"

"You've got it wrong, Gresham," the limping old man said. "My star is lying on my desk. I'm Bert Maguire, now. Just plain Bert Maguire, and I've had all I can stomach of you and your boys in the same town with me. I'll give you sixty seconds to hit leather and ride out—for good."

Fred Gill saw Gresham pale slightly. There was fear in the man, after all. Not fear of a tall old man with more guts than brains, but fear of something which was not a part of his plans. This fear was important to Fred Gill. This fear and Bert Maguire's stiff, straight back. It changed something in him. Maguire had nothing to win in this, but he had bought chips, anyway. Maguire would be able to live with himself until he died. Fred Gill envied this. And suddenly the barriers were down, permitting his body to take the orders his mind had been striving to give it for twenty-four hours. He spoke over his shoulder to Clint Barney.

"Part of this belongs to us—"

Then, without waiting for Barney's answer, he stepped across the walk and also down into the dust. Gresham's eyes shuttled to him and back to the stiff figure of the old marshal.

"Get out of my way, you old fool!" he snapped. "And you stop right where you are, Gill!"

Fred kept on walking.

"Forty seconds now, Gresham," he said, astonished at the penetrating coldness of his own voice.

"Thirty seconds—" Maguire said.

So tense was the instant and all those caught up in it that it seemed to Fred only one shot was fired. A shot from Ike Gresham's unbelievably fast right-hand gun. A shot which drove a shaft of flame deep into Fred Gill's body, rocking him on his feet but miraculously not doing him the violence he had always feared from a gunshot wound. Yet this impression that

(Continued on page 124)

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 113)

WHAT kind of a cowpuncher would you make? Or, put differently, how much do you know about cowpuncher life and Western subjects in general? Below are listed questions—rangeland brain teasers, all of them. If you can answer eighteen or more of them correctly, you're definitely ranch boss material. Answer sixteen or seventeen, and you're good. But answer fifteen, and you're definitely in the milk-toast cowboy class. Good luck—and don't holler calf rope, unless you have to!

1. True or false? A "rocking chair horse" is a horse having a very rough, swaying gait.

2. What is the meaning of the cowpuncher term to "rim fire" a horse?

3. Give two rangeland definitions for the cowpuncher expression, "knothead."

4. According to cowpuncher terminology, a "lass rope" is: A rope which a puncher throws around the neck of his girl? An ordinary rope of the type used by punchers? A rope used only on young calves?

5. True or false? "Hollihanning" is the act of diving from a horse onto the horns of a steer—in bulldogging.

6. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told you he was going to the "hoofshaper," you would think he was going to visit: A chiropodist? A shoe store? A blacksmith?

7. True or false? "A hoodlum wagon," according to cowpuncher slang, is a wagon in which prisoners are carried to jail.

8. What is the meaning of the term, "holler calf rope"?

9. True or false? In the language of the old west a "cloud hunter" was a prospector who spent his time looking for fabulous fortunes.

10. True or false? In old time Western terminology, a type of long-horned cattle from the coast region of Texas was known

by Westerners of that day as a "coaster."

11. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told you he was "looking for a coffin," you would think: He was expecting someone to shoot him? He was expecting a posse to hang him? He was planning to take a trip?

12. "Coffee cooler," according to Western terminology, means which of the following? A prospector? A buggy? A windmill?

13. True or false? "Cat back" is a slang term used in reference to mild bucking.

14. Why might a cowpuncher "can" a cow?

15. If the ranch boss sent you out to bring in a "cactus boomer," you would return with: An iguana? A desert Indian? A wild brush cow?

16. True or false? In cowboy slang, a "buzz saw" is a spur with a rowel having a few long sharp points.

17. True or false? In the terminology of the West, "brasada" is used in reference to brush country.

18. True or false? In cowpuncher slang, "brindle" means "to go."

19. True or false? A "blab board" is a weaning device.

20. "Blow pipe" is a western slang term for which of the following articles: Rifle? Wildcat? A cowpuncher or other person who talks too much?

"You've come a long way to hell's rim, mister. There's just one place to go and three ways to get there—run, fight, or crawl!"



By **GEORGE C. APPELL**

CHAPTER ONE

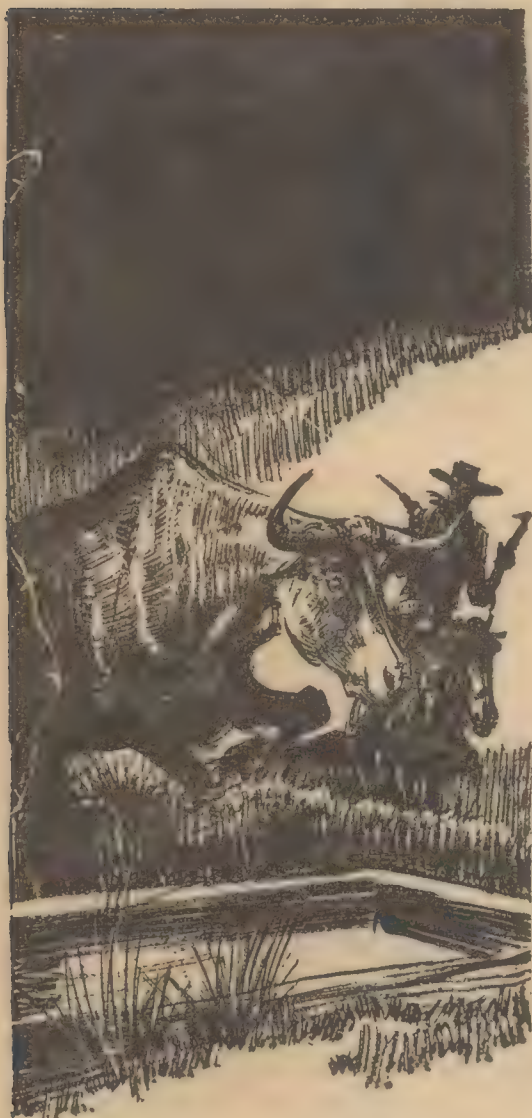
Manhunt

THE rider in the faded blue flannel shirt and the weather-beaten Stetson came slowly across the top of the morning mists, looking like the upper

half of a horseman's ghost. The mists would smoke the prairie until an hour after sunrise; he'd been riding since four o'clock.

He came out of them, for a minute, where the land rose; and he sat a moment gazing at the tiny town ahead. Uinta,

TRIGGER TIME



Eversole tried to aim but the stamping steers swayed past in heavy-hoofed indecision. . . .

The yellow ball of the sun hung in the east, already flushing to light crimson. The rider rolled a cigarette and blew smoke and wasted another minute looking at Uinta. The last spot on earth to look for a man, so probably one of the likeliest spots to find him.

The mists were beginning to melt. It was full morning, and Uinta would be awake. Awake but not moving too fast, and that's the way the rider had planned it. He wanted to close down on Uinta before anyone moved too fast, or too far.

He feathered flank with his spurs and the horse walked off the rise and moved through the faint, clinging mists. By the time the rider reached Uinta, they'd vanished entirely and the sun was a red plate behind him. He threw off at the first stable he came to and took an oilskin roll from the cantle.

"Hay," he ordered. "And rub him down good." He hadn't sweated the night chill from the animal yet; he'd had to time his arrival.

The stable boy took the reins and paused. He closed one calculating eye. "How long'll you be?"

"Till I decide to leave." The rider stared down at the boy's squinting face, and wanted to twist it. "You'll get paid when I leave."

The boy glanced up at the flint-chip gray eyes, the thin lips, the bent nose and the hard, furrowed skin. "Yessir," he said, and led the horse inside.

The man walked down the dusty street, oilskin roll on one arm. On his left arm. He kept his right free, though he didn't

it was. A collection of whip-sawed board buildings baking to rot under the baleful suns of the long, long days. A string of stores with false fronts, a saloon and two stables. A sheriff's office and a jail. No church, though. No church and no school. There wasn't time for those.

swing it. He kept it near the heavy .44 that bumped his thigh as he walked.

He turned into the small, planked building with the caked legend, SHERIFF, painted over the door. A lean, lazy-muscled man took his boots off the one desk and nodded.

"Mornin'."

His voice sounded like his eyes looked, and the man in the doorway guessed that nothing much happened around here. Either that, or the sheriff chose not to see what did happen.

"You the sheriff?" He put the roll on a chair and stood up to the desk.

The sleepy man nodded again. "I'm paid fer that. Got troubles?" He yawned awesomely, showing green and gold teeth.

"No, but somebody else might have." He handed over a folded paper, still crisp despite the heat of his wallet. "That introduces me." He found the makings, fixed another smoke, and lighted it.

The sheriff was impressed. He handed back the paper and stood up. He held out a limp hand, and they shook. Briefly. "Sergeant Eversole, provost-marshal's office, huh?"

"I work directly for the department commander. Results are the only things he measures a man by." Results were the only things Eversole measured men by, too. He looked directly into the sheriff's querulous eyes.

"Well, anythin' I can do to help—" His voice trailed off, and the invitation to explain was there.

Eversole pumped smoke. He was thoughtful now, as you have to be thoughtful when judging men. He wouldn't tell this sheriff any more than he had to. He said, "About six years ago a man deserted from Fort Apache."

A grin shook the corners of the sheriff's mouth. "That's no news."

"I know. But we want this one back." He inhaled smoke, and then crushed the

cigarette under a boot-tip. "We're closing the books."

"Army giving up?"

"Hardly. Change of station. Fourth Cavalry to Dakota Territory. So the books got to balance."

"Uh-huh." The sheriff appeared to ponder. "What's this man like?"

Eversole knew it from memory. "Age about thirty-five, now. Height six feet plus an inch. Weight medium. Hair light brown. Eyes blue."

"Shucks." The sheriff sat down and put his boots back on the desk. He palmed another yawn. "That's anybody 'cept a Chineese cook." He shrugged. "He got a name?"

"It was Coughlin when he went over the hill. Joseph Coughlin. I wouldn't know what it is now."

"Six years ago?" The sheriff shook his head. "That's a long time, sarge. A very long time." He picked up a mug of cold coffee from the night before and slurped it in.

"Mackenzie wants him back. Mackenzie always gets deserters back, sheriff. He has the Fourth."

THE sheriff nodded, and his sleepy eyes twinkled. "I heerd of him. Hardboots, huh?" He put the mug down, empty. "They tell me he spreads 'em on a wheel."

"Frequently. This man was spread, before he broke out. That's another thing: he may still have those scars on his wrists. Know anybody with scars on his wrists?"

"The boys hereabouts, they keeps their sleeves down, sarge. No, I wouldn't know." He rubbed his ear for a moment, frowning. "Why'd he go over?"

"Gun-fight, off the post. Drunk. Nobody killed, but both wounded. Coughlin and a civilian. Coughlin took a slug in the shoulder. It was healing when they spread him. So he broke out."

The sheriff grunted. "Don't blame 'im. So now you'll ask me, do I know a gent with a gimp shoulder, an' I'll say no, I sure do not." He grinned.

Eversole took a turn around the small, hot room, glancing at the posters on the board, noting crimes committed. "Lot of killers around these parts, aren't there?"

"Uh-huh. They hole-up in Spanish Peaks, most of 'em. Pretty bad, the whole lot."

"Ever try to get 'em?"

"Not me, bud. I'm very happy right here."

Eversole went back to the desk. He leaned on it. "That's another point, sheriff. He flips when he draws."

"This Coughlin?"

"Yes. Call it a mannerism. He flips his gun once, fancy, before he shoots."

The sheriff looked doubtful. "That don't seem like sense to me, wastin' a second in the air."

"He never shot much, I guess. Just played with it."

"Not a killer, then?"

"A deserter. And we want him back."

The quick cadence of hooves sounded in the street, and a team and rig passed. A man and two small boys were on the seat, and the boys were laughing. The rig passed from sight.

"Who's that?" Eversole asked idly.

"Calmer. Lives out beyond, ranchin'."

"I didn't think ranching was safe these days, with the crowd in the Peaks running off stock all the time."

"It isn't safe."

"Calmer. Must have sand in him. Lived here long?"

"Oh-h—four-five years. That's long in this town. We don't hold population."

"Not safe?"

The sheriff nodded sagely. "Keep to your chips, don't ask questions, an' you'll live a while. Fence-out a range, though, an' it's askin' for trouble. Not many of

'em try it around here." Something like pride was in his voice.

Eversole took his roll off the chair and opened the door. "I'll be around. How's the hotel?"

"Rotten. Say—you ever seen this man?"

"No. There isn't even a picture of him." Eversole started to close the door. "I've only been in the department about three years." He closed the door and went up the plankwalk to the saloon. It was still early morning, but two or three men stood at the bar, a bottle in front of them. A listless game of poker was going on at a rear table.

The bartender waddled up, hands in his apron. The sun gleamed on his plastered forelock. His cautious eyes were narrowed against the glare.

"Munnin'," he gruffed. "Whiskey?"

"No, thanks." Eversole lay his elbows on the bar and leaned over it. "Just conversation."

The bartender set his mouth to one side, waiting.

"An old friend of mine came out this way a few years back. Name of Coughlin. Joe Coughlin. Thought you might've heard of him."

The bartender ruminated, eyes almost shut. Then he shook his head.

"Never have. Coughlin?"

"Stretch of a man. Light hair. Light hair and a lame shoulder."

"Can't say that I know 'im. What's his line?"

Eversole waved a hand. "Anything he can turn to. He's a rider."

"Plenty o' riders 'round here, mister." He looked up shrewdly. "Thought o' the Peaks? That country's full o' gents that're bein' looked for." He winked.

Eversole nodded. "I might do that. Killers, huh?" Coughlin was not a killer, or had not been a killer. Eversole recalled the names of the men on the Wanted posters: Slidell and Glennon.

Neither had resembled Coughlin. "Slidell is in the Peaks, isn't he?"

"I wouldn't know, mister."

"Thought my friend might be with him or Glennon."

The bartender hesitated. "Might try the ranches, 'yond town."

"Which ones?"

"Only three of 'em, mister. Shrotf's, out'n the trail to the Peaks. An' Calmer's." He stopped, abruptly, and his eyelids came together. He eyed Eversole in silence. Then, "An' Skinner's. Skinner's is two days out. It was trigger time out there last month, an' they might know something."

"Trigger time?"

The bartender lowered his voice. "When them in the Peaks jumps a place an' runs off stock, they call it that. It's when a man gets to hell outa the way."

"What kind of man?"

"The sensible kind, mister."

Eversole went out, eyes hard. He strode to the stable and tossed the boy a silver dollar. "Keep a stall. I'll be back."

The trail to Shrouf's was dim in the dust, as if it hadn't been used in a long time and Shrouf had been staying close to home, for reasons best known to himself. Eversole raised the ranch buildings at noon and rode straight to the biggest one and threw off at the tie-rail. A pinto stood on three legs, patiently switching flies with its tail. It didn't look ridden-out.

SHROUF was craven-faced and rock-eyed and had a wrenched mouth, like a man permanently suspicious of his fellow men. He stood in the doorway, long arms braced upward against the jambs.

Eversole introduced himself with a short sentence. He judged Shrouf to be a man you could talk to. "I'm after a deserter from Fort Apache. Name of Coughlin."

Shrouf raised his lip and shook his head. "Try the Peaks. That's where such would go." His voice was like a file on metal.

"Thought I'd ask around the ranches first."

"Not many ranches to ask at." He dropped his arms and stepped through the door. "When'd he desert?"

"Six years ago."

Shrouf pursed his lips and walked to the tie-rail and gripped it. "Think you'll come up with him now?"

Eversole saw the wrists, the long, knobby tanned wrists. They were scarless. "I got to. Orders."

"That's right. Army orders." He spat between the pinto's forelegs. "Why don't the army clean out the Peaks for us, 'stead of lookin' fer deserters? It's got so a man can't live honest no more."

Eversole swung to the saddle and gathered rein. "You got a sheriff for that." He grinned.

Shrouf grinned back. "We got a milk-head who's afraid to go out after dark. Tell that to your boss." He spat again. "Some folks out here, they'd like to build up the West an' make it decent to live in. But with Slidell an' them rulin' the roost—ah, hell." He straightened and brushed his hands. "I wish you luck, anyway."

Eversole rode cross-patch through the long, purple shadows of twilight and handed his horse to the boy at the stable. "Give him another rub, and he can have one bucket of oats."

"Yessir."

The hotel was a two-story building with a three-story front. Eversole dumped his roll on the cot, washed in the basin, and went downstairs. He found the sheriff in the bar, studying the amber glitter of whiskey in his glass.

"Any luck?" he inquired. He seemed to be nursing a joke within him.

"None yet." They fingered their

glasses thoughtfully. Thunder grumbled in the distance and a sudden wind spun the dust in the street and rattled windows. A door slammed somewhere. "Quick storm."

The sheriff raised his glass. "Always like this in season. Be over soon, though."

Rain pelted the windows and snare-drummed on the roof; it lashed the evening with wet whips and flogged men to running. One burst into the bar, shaking his shirt, fanning his hat.

"Double barley," he demanded. He nodded to the sheriff, glanced once at Eversole, and swallowed the liquor neat. "Helluva night." He was a big man, big in the shoulders and arms and chest, but his waist was lean and his legs supple.

Eversole whispered, "A few hands like that, and you could herd all the rats out of the Peaks in twenty-four hours."

"Not me." The sheriff refilled his glass. The rain was drumming more dully and the wind was gasping in dying gusts.

"Funny. I was raised over in the Republican River country, and whenever a maverick cut loose there were plenty of men willing to run him down. Men partial to the double-cinch, the grass rope and the ox-bow stirrup. Good men, sheriff."

"Sure." The sheriff smiled glassily. He twirled his glass a few times. "How

long you been looking for this man?"

"Less than a month. But the department's been looking for him for six years, almost. This's about the last place on the map."

"Uh-huh." The sheriff yawned. "Well, sarge, when you been in the business a little longer you'll learn to relax. The country's only so big, an' sooner or later you'll cut his trail." He finished his drink hastily and paid up. "'Sides—life's a sweet proposition, sarge. You oughta know that."

"It isn't if you don't get results." He watched the sheriff walk out, watched him cross the porch and go into the clearing evening. The lights from the windows lay ragged and yellow outside on the damp walk.

The man with the barley asked, "You the sharp from the army?"

"I am."

"Better stay out of the Peaks. They shoot like you an' me strike matches," he said.

"Who's 'they'?"

"I reckon you've heard." His eyes slid sideways. "Asked around the ranches yet?"

"I'm doing that now." Eversole shifted weight to his other boot. "You seem mighty interested."

"Everyone is. Interested in the Peaks, I mean. Clean them out an' you'll do honest men a favor."

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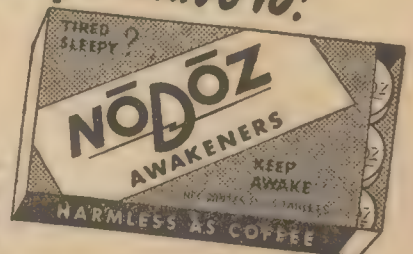
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CHAPTER TWO

Lair of the Lost

THE rain-rinsed morning was brittle clear and cool. Eversole went past Shrouf's place at an easy trot and turned off the dim trail a mile beyond. A weather-rusted sign said CALMER, and pointed to a spread of cottonwoods in a shallow valley. On the western rim the Peaks rose purple and green, sharp tips like pike heads warning strangers away and protecting those inside.

In the shade of the cottonwoods a pale-haired woman with still-soft skin and deep, brown eyes sat on the veranda of the ranch house, legs tucked beneath her, fingers raveling yarn. The two small boys Eversole had seen on the rig were playing an intense game of Indian in the shrubs. Both had light brown hair, wind-ruffled and thin.

The rig stood by a wide barn a hundred yards behind the house, its shafts empty. The barn was flanked on either side by a high-wire corral, and Eversole, eyes photoplating the scene, counted forty-three head of sleek steers standing in slumbrous dignity.

The woman was watching him, her hands still now, a half-smile on her lips.

He lifted his hat and bowed from the saddle. "Morning, ma'am. This Calmer's place?"

"Yes." She stood up and came off the veranda. "I'm Mrs. Calmer."

He dropped to the ground and dragged reins over the horse's head. Over her shoulder, far back in the shadows of the house, he saw a face pass a window. Blue metal flashed for an instant.

"My name's Eversole." He looked beyond the twins and saw a run of chickens. They were wired in, not loose all over the place. The yard had been raked recently; the house was painted grey, with white trim. "Is Mr. Calmer here?"

Her smile sank away and her hands rose, fingers locked. "I'll—just a moment, I'll see." She walked onto the veranda and tapped on the window. "John?"

John Calmer came out, shoulders high, arms slightly forward. The hammer of the gun on his hip winked blue in the sunlight.

"Mr. Calmer?" Eversole ambled past the woman, smiling. He offered a hand, and Calmer, after a moment, took it. "That's a nice holster. Make it yourself?"

Calmer ignored the question. "Around here, you got to keep a gun handy."

"I understand there's been trouble with stock." Eversole pretended to take in the house with its man-length windows and wide doorways and cool corridors. But it was the image of John Calmer that ran across his eye. He saw the carefully carved initials J C on the gun's outward grip; the trigger-guard was large enough to permit use by a man with gloves. A gloved cavalryman. Eversole moved his eyes full on Calmer.

"I'm looking for a man."

Calmer stepped off the veranda. "You a sheriff?" He seemed older than his thirty-five years; his light brown hair was shot through with silver spears. His blue eyes were permanently slitted, as if they'd stared long at horizons, at things that moved in the distance. "From this state?" His voice was rough with urgency.

"From any state." He passed over the paper identifying him. Calmer read it twice, then handed it back.

"Army cop, hey?" He crossed his body with his right hand and began to knead his left shoulder. "Who's your man?"

"A deserter. Name of Coughlin. Joseph Coughlin." Eversole knew now why the barkeep in the Uinta saloon had squinted so strangely when he'd men-

tioned Calmer's place. "Went over the hill from Fort Apache six years ago."

Mrs. Calmer called the twins. She hustled them into the house, murmuring something about lunch. The wind was turning leaves over, and a gray haze veiled the skies and the sun was a sullen yellow disc.

Calmer repeated, "Six years ago." He put a cigarette together and cupped his palms around the match. The smoke was flung away on the wind. "Must be a pretty important deserter."

"Desertion knows no degree. Either you are one or you aren't one."

The cigarette crackled, to an inhale. "How come you're pokin' around this corner of the lot?"

"Because we've looked every place else." The gray veil of the heavens was thickening to slate and the wind gasped impatiently, as if snarling for rain. The Peaks were little purple lumps on the boundaries of sight-range.

A dare sparked in John Calmer's eyes. "What's he look like?"

Eversole took a deep breath. "He looks a good deal like you."

"Uh-huh." Calmer sucked a last smoke from the cigarette and broke it to pieces between his fingers. He ground the pieces into the earth with a boot. There'd be no waste matter in his yard. "Maybe he was in on the Skinner deal."

"The Skinner deal?"

"Yeah, thirty mile north. Slidell and Glennon jumped it an' run off most the stock. Skinner was hit, his brother got killed and one of the hands died of wounds." He strolled to the end of the veranda and peered toward the corrals. "I'd like to see 'em make a pass at this place. That's gold-cup stock out there."

EVERSOLE took advantage of Calmer's turned back to release his holster-catch and tug the .44 up a quarter of an inch. On a flash draw, that

would mean a saving of about a quarter of a second.

Calmer faced around and strolled back. He moved his left shoulder in his shirt once. "Have lunch with us. I guess the kids have finished theirs."

Ellen Calmer loaded their plates with a ranch meal. Bloody steaks and steaming potatoes and wax-beans from the garden. Hand-sized cuts of bread and butter from the springhouse, and a gooseberry jam she'd made herself. "I put it up every fall," she said. "When John's branding."

The rain sang on the roof and lashed the windows, and outside, the cottonwoods shivered. The twins wanted to play some more Indian.

"Play inside," their mother said gently. "You have the whole house to run in." They ran.

Eversole ladled jam on a slice of bread. "How long've you had this place, Mr. Calmer?" The gun felt snug on his thigh.

"On to four years." Calmer and his wife swept their eyes across each other. Then she looked down, picking at her food, pushing it away. Not eating, finally. The fingers of one hand were bunched tight.

Eversole swallowed his bread. "I suppose you're a native, as the saying goes?"

"No, I'm not." His drill-straight eyes stabbed at Eversole. "I'm from Kansas, originally." He reached for the salt. His wrist was a-glint with firmly-healed scar tissue.

"Too bad you've got that threat hanging over you."

The sentence hung in the silence.

Ellen Calmer got up and excused herself. She took her plate and cup. The weather, she said. The weather always gave her a headache. She went into the kitchen.

Calmer salted his potatoes. He asked, "What threat—Sergeant?"

"The threat from the Peaks. Slidell and Glennon."

"Oh." The breath seemed to go out of him. He twitched his left shoulder, and a frown slid across his face. "Damned rain. Gets in your bones."

Eversole gave him another push. "Got a fracture?"

"No."

The rain brushed the eaves and scurried along the drains and leaked crazily down the windows.

A thump sounded from upstairs and an Indian chief squealed in delight. The hunter, trapped in a closet, yelled for help.

"Crazy kids," Calmer said. He raised a cup of coffee to his mouth and sipped it. He frowned again. "Might have to send 'em away. I don't want to do that."

"Why?" Eversole made a smoke.

"Rustlers, for one thing. Their bullets got no brains, no more than they have. They shoot at noises, not sights. They work in the dak." He put the cup down, and his eyes were grim.

"Too bad you haven't got a sheriff with a spine in his back."

"Oh—him." Calmer flapped a hand, wagged it disgustedly. The glint of ivory-hued scars showed pale on his tanned wrist. "It's not only that, though. Hell, knock off Slidell and Glennon, an' you fold up the whole gang." He rolled a smoke and lighted it. "It's Uinta, too. No school. And no church, either. The ladies like a church, and it wouldn't be bad for the kids. But no one'll settle on account them damned thieves in the Peaks." Smoke rushed from his nostrils. "So you get no taxes. Shrouf, he's about to pack. Skinner's at the bottom, it'll take him years to climb up." He shrugged his lame shoulder. "Guess I'm next."

Ellen Calmer started to clear off the dishes. She was composed now, but she kept her eyes from Eversole and she worked in silence.

In the living room, Calmer said, "You might's well stay 'til the weather clears.

Your horse'd sink to his hocks in that mud yonder."

They sat down, eyes away from each other. Thunder slammed the skies and the rain sang louder. Upstairs, the Indian chief took another scalp and the hunter shrieked, cornered again.

CHAPTER THREE

Sundown Shootout

EVERSOLE decided to take John Calmer back to Uinta with him when he left the ranch. Ellen would have to run it alone, somehow. She could get a man on the place. There were lots of them idle in town. He tamped his cigarette out carefully.

Calmer looked the length of his nose and asked, off-handedly, "How's army life these days?"

"Same. Reveille to Retreat. Rotten grub, rotten rifles, rotten recruits. Takes men like Mackenzie to hold it together."

"Mackenzie—" Calmer studied his hands. "How is he?"

"You know him?" Eversole drew back his right arm slightly; his wrist rubbed the holster.

Calmer shook his head, eyes still on his hands. His shoulders rose and fell with a breath. "I've heard of him. An old saber, they tell me."

"I mind once when we were falling in for First Call—" Eversole paused, smiling. His palm found the butt of the .44.

Calmer tripped into it. "They fall in for First Call? I thought Assembly—"

Their eyes met, and locked.

Dishes clacked from the kitchen; and upstairs, the hunter tumbled the chief with a gleeful howl. Thunder whimpered wearily, its strength all gone.

John Calmer came to his feet slowly, hands at his sides. He didn't take his eyes from Eversole. "It's pretty early, but would you like a drink?"

Eversole left his chair, eyes on Calmer's hands. "Sure. I'll take a drink." He raised his face to Calmer's set face. "Let's go get it together."

"All right."

The liquor was in the kitchen. Ellen Calmer watched them from wide brown eyes while they got a bottle, glasses, and a pitcher of water. Calmer bent over to pull the cork, and his wife stared fiercely at Eversole. He looked away.

They held up their glasses to each other, nodded, and drank. Eversole felt the liquor sting his stomach and bounce burning into his brain. One would be enough, he concluded.

"John?" Ellen Calmer had an odd look about her now, the look of a truthful woman who has had to fabricate something in her mind and who detested it. She looked helpless, standing by the sink with water-pink hands, fingers holding a damp towel. "Mr. Shrouf was by here yesterday."

"Shrouf?" Surprise widened his face.

"Yes, and he said—" she clutched the towel to her, talking fast—"he said to run your stock over to his place today, if you wanted to. He said it would be safer in his corrals than out here nearer the Peaks. You could run it over now—and stay there tonight."

Eversole thought, *Don't sound so desperate. He won't get away from me now.*

"That's lop-sided," Calmer told her. "My stock stays here."

Ellen stepped toward him. "We could all go—the twins, me. It would be sort of a holiday." She shot fierce eyes at Eversole. "The sergeant, I'm sure, can find his way back alone. The sun will be out soon."

One woman, Eversole thought. One woman trying to bite through the bonds of fact and circumstance, of years piled in the past and the inevitability of the future. One small woman putting paper in the dike.

Calmer said, "No." He put down his glass. "Funny I didn't see him."

"You were in the corrals, John."

They were silent for a space.

"I thought Mr. Calmer and me could ride to town together. He said something about picking up a hackamore at the stable." There, that's as easy as I can make it for you, Eversole thought.

"A hackamore?" John Calmer turned, slitted eyes quizzical. "There's not a mustang on the place."

The twins scampered downstairs and raced through the front door and were gone.

Calmer said, "It's getting late, Ellen. Better get them in before dark." He looked through the window at the corrals, where the steers plodded into the fairing weather, sleek hides gleaming. A hard

(Continued on page 125)

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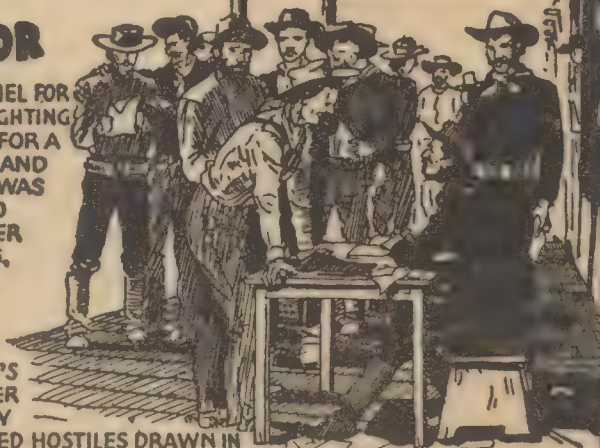
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by LEE

NINE DAYS OF HORROR

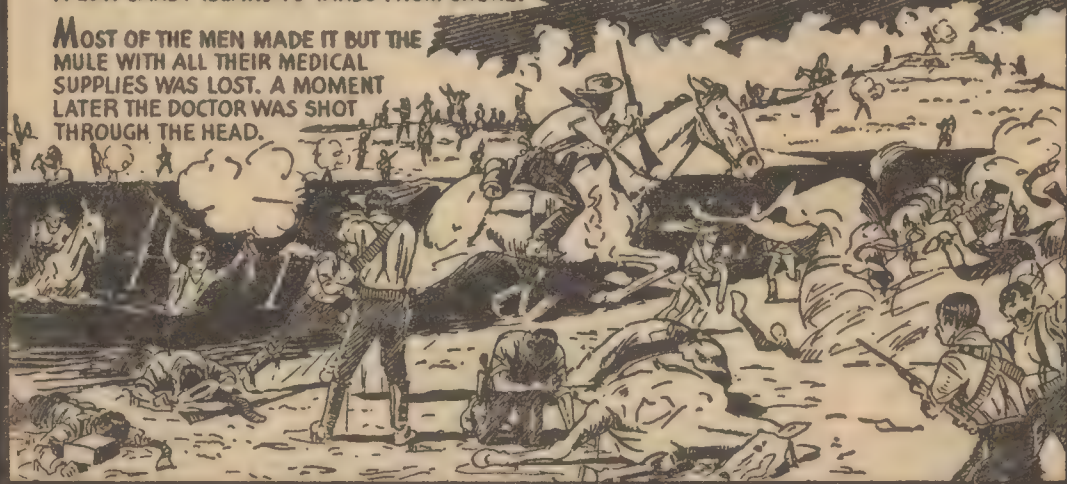
YOUNG GEORGE FORSYTH, BREVETED COLONEL FOR BRAVERY IN ACTION, HADN'T ENOUGH FIGHTING DURING THE CIVIL WAR AND WENT WEST FOR A GO AT THE INDIANS. WITH CHEYENNES AND SIOUX ON THE WARPATH, COL. FORSYTH WAS AUTHORIZED TO ENLIST A TROOP OF 50 SCOUTS AND EASILY FILLED HIS ROSTER WITH FRONTIERSMEN AND EX-SOLDIERS, CHOOSING AS SERGEANT WM. H. McCALL, A FORMER GENERAL.

PICKING UP THE TRAIL OF A MARAUDING BAND IN THE SUMMER OF '69, FORSYTH'S SCOUTS FOLLOWED UP THE ARIKAREE RIVER INTO COLORADO WHERE THEY SUDDENLY CAME FACE TO FACE WITH 500 MOUNTED HOSTILES DRAWN IN LINE OF BATTLE-- AN UNUSUAL MANEUVER FOR INDIANS-- UNDER CHIEF ROMAN NOSE.



THE SCOUTS STUBBORNLY HELD OFF THE HORSEMEN AND HUNDREDS OF OTHERS ON FOOT WHO POURED OUT TO THE ATTACK UNTIL THE COLONEL ORDERED A RETREAT ACROSS THE SHALLOWS TO A LOW SANDY ISLAND 75 YARDS FROM SHORE.

MOST OF THE MEN MADE IT BUT THE MULE WITH ALL THEIR MEDICAL SUPPLIES WAS LOST. A MOMENT LATER THE DOCTOR WAS SHOT THROUGH THE HEAD.



— OLD WEST —

COL. FORSYTH, WOUNDED IN THE LEG, STOOD CALMLY UNDER A HAIL OF BULLETS AND ARROWS DIRECTING THE TROOPERS AS THEY TOOK SHELTER BEHIND DEAD HORSES AND HASTILY DUG FOXHOLES AND TRENCHES WITH THEIR BOWIE-KNIVES. DURING THE NIGHT THEY STRENGTHENED THEIR DEFENSES AND SCOOPED OUT A WELL.

AFTER TWO DAYS UNDER THE BURNING SUN AND CONSTANT INDIAN SHIPING, ROMAN NOSE MARSHALED HIS FORCES AND THEY KNEW WHAT WAS COMING.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE TILL COMMANDED, THEN GIVE IT TO THEM IN VOLLEYS," THE COLONEL ORDERED. "IT'S OUR ONLY CHANCE."



WITH WILD WHOOPS A THOUSAND BRAVES RODE INTO THE STREAM. FIVE VOLLEYS FAILED TO STOP THEM BUT THE SHOT KILLED THE CHIEF AND BROKE THE CHARGE SO CLOSELY SOME EVEN LEAPED OVER THE TRENCHES.

THE INDIANS SETTLED DOWN TO A SIEGE. THAT NIGHT TWO VOLUNTEERS SLIPPED AWAY IN AN ATTEMPT TO GET THROUGH TO FT. WALLACE. THE FOOD GAVE OUT. THEN EVEN HORSE MEAT BECAME INEDIBLE. THE WOUNDED WERE IN BAD SHAPE. AND ALWAYS THERE WAS THE PITILESS SUN AND THE SHIPING OF THE INDIANS.

ON THE EIGHTH DAY COL. FORSYTH SUGGESTED THOSE ABLE TO MOVE MAKE A DASH FOR IT IN THE DARKNESS. THAT, FORTUNATELY, WAS UNNECESSARY FOR THE NEXT AFTERNOON A RESCUING COLUMN APPEARED.

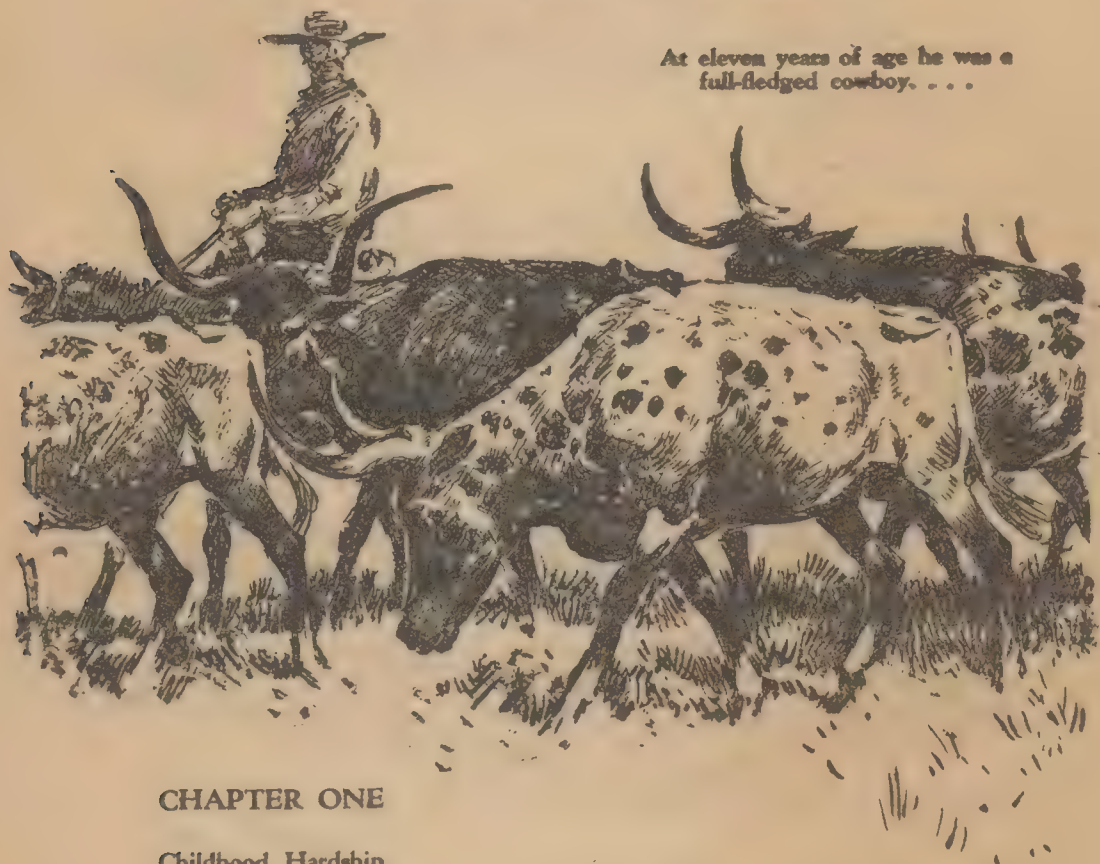


FORSYTH HAD LOST HALF HIS COMMAND IN DEAD AND WOUNDED BUT HE HAD HELD OFF 60 TIMES HIS NUMBER IN ONE OF THE OLD WEST'S MOST GAILANT STANDS.

BADLANDS BUSTER

By **RAYMOND S. SPEARS**

At eleven years of age he was a
full-fledged cowboy. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Childhood Hardship

CHARLES A. SIRINGO ranks among the most daring of the Westerners, not merely among the notorious outlaws but with any of the lawmen. Within the scope of sheer, impertinent daring, in certain types of nerve and courage, perhaps he stands first: he not only enforced law among the most dangerous outlaws the open spaces ever harbored—he also stole their sweethearts. What greater exhibition of nerve can be offered?

Another feature displayed throughout the career of Charlie Siringo which appears to be unique in the annals of the West, is that he mocked his own feats of effrontery, laughing not only at the victims of his taunts but at himself as well in the face of deadliest peril. He showed heroic contempt for enmity; he remained a "fool cowboy," first, last and always.

Charlie Siringo was born on February 7, 1855, on Matagorda Peninsula, a section of the barrier reef along the Salt

*Deadly as the worst outlaw . . . as straight as a law-
man's bullet was Siringo—the greatest manhunter
the badlands ever knew!*

**First
of Nine
Parts**



In a hamlet of a few cabins, Dutch Settlement was the Siringo home in a frame cottage. When Charlie was a yearling, his father died. He, the widow and older sister faced the problems of meager living.

When Charlie learned to walk, his one garment was a cotton shirt cut down from a flour bag. Wild mustangs and longhorn cattle roamed the drifting sand dunes, browsing on the woody fibres of

Grass coast of Texas, fronting on the Gulf of Mexico. His father was Italian; his mother was Irish; Charlie was American.

The barrier reef, more than two hundred and fifty miles long, had few human inhabitants. The Matagorda peninsula section, like all the rest, was long and narrow, seventy-five by less than two miles.

salt bushes, saw-grasses, and now and again eked out on dried wildfowl and fish thrown ashore by high winds, including hurricanes.

Luck, which rode all through Charlie's life with him, in 1859 brought an Illinois "Yankee" to the scattered settlement. The latter opened a school, and Charlie at-

tended, in charge of his sister. Grass burrs got into their bare feet, and if they had time, they followed the sand beach instead of short-cutting to the school master's house, picking up pretty shells and "trying to catch the shadow of a flying seagull or trying to lasso sand crabs" with a noosed trot line riding "on my stick horse," in imitation of cowboys who came out on the reef rounding up and roping the Arabian Spanish mustangs and longhorn cattle.

The sand crabs raced for the water or dug into holes when Charlie pursued them with his line. He headed off one old fat fellow which holed down. He dug the sand away—"with my hands, dog fashion." He "played dog by sticking my snoot down in the hole to smell" and one of the claws clamped Charlie's nose. Yelling, Charlie fled, and one William Berge coming out to the beach after a load of wood broke the crab's claws apart. The teacher demanded an excuse for his tardiness.

"Being a little George W., minus the hatchet, I told him the truth. Needless to say he laid me across his knee and made me think a nest of bumble bees was having a dance in the seat of my breeches—or at least where my breeches should have been. I never had a pair of pants on up to that time."

His long white shirt was made of a "flour sack after some of the big bugs in Matagorda had eaten the flour out." On Monday morning, wash day, Charlie ate two plates of mush (cornmeal) and three hard boiled eggs for breakfast. The Civil War between North and South was now waging. Union troops came to the barrier reef.

When the soldiers came, Charlie was seven years of age. The army was Captain Doctor Pierceson's company of rebels, drilling in anticipation of sea-going Yankees coming to the barrier reef along the gulf coast. The company camped out from the settlement and the boys watched the

drills and then disciplined themselves in tactical formations. That autumn five thousand Yankees landed at Deckrows Point and came along the reef.

"They camped one night close to our house and filled me up with hard-tack," Charlie remembered, "which was quite a treat to a fellow living on mush and milk."

A draw battle was fought for nearly a week, the gunfire clearly heard at the settlement. "Many dead men were washed ashore on the beach. My sister and I stumbled onto one poor fellow one day, shot through the heart. His clothes were gone and his wrist was marked 'J.T.' in India ink. The Yankees held the point of the peninsula, and rebels held the neck. Skirmishers and scouts met at the settlement, which was halfway between the camps, and little fights were fought."

Charles was out with Billy Williams on the eternal quest for food—oysters, fish, or wild meat, to go with cornmeal, sweet potatoes, and parched corn coffee, when the Yankee scouts charged up and "throwing their pistols in Williams's face, told him if they ever found him so far from home again, they would kill him." Charlie thus faced revolvers in desperate encounter before he was eight years old. Afterwards "Williams slipped into their camp after dark and stole eleven head of their best horses and gave them to the rebels." He was caught on his way back from the rebel camp and had a rope around his neck, when the Yankee general turned him loose, "—on account of his old age and bravery."

Williams, frequently under fire, carried a shell home one day. He thought most of the powder was emptied out. A boy brought a coal of fire in tongs.

"I was present," Siringo told, "and not liking the looks of it, crept out behind the picket gate, a few yards away, and peeped between the pickets. The whole family was looking on to see the fun. Mattie, one of the little girls, sat with her arms around

a dog's neck, within a few feet of the shell." Williams dropped the coal in a hole. The thing exploded, throwing iron fragments, enveloping the place in smoke. "Mr. Williams emerged hopping on one leg. A piece of the bomb shell took off one of the dog's legs without even touching Mattie." Williams, mortally wounded, lived only a few days. This was, perhaps, the first exhibition of what Siringo called his bump of caution in an hour of deadly peril, an instinct against unnecessary risk, an interesting lack of bravado.

THE baby, emerging into boyhood, at four years of age was riding a stick and throwing a trot-line noose. He was learning to ride bare-back calves before he was five years of age, in the way of open range children.

Siringo and his dog supplied the family with raccoon meat before he was eight years of age. Although he must have had a musket or army revolver from skirmish fields, he overlooks them in later account. Also, he forgets to tell whether the table fish were speared, netted or caught on hook and line. His whole interest was within the cowboy-scope, his boyhood slant. He watched Texas riders driving the Matagorda sand-reef cattle to the mainland so the Yankees wouldn't have fresh meat. He was riding the mustangs left on the dunes during war times. At eleven years of age he was working. "I became a full-fledged cowboy, wearing broad sombrero, high-heeled boots, Mexican spurs, and the dignity of a full-grown man. I had hired out to run cattle for Mr. Faldien at the wage of ten dollars per month."

The cattle on the mainland multiplied enormously during the war. Among them appeared hump-backed, short-horned, silver-blue hide offspring of three Brahma bulls who swam ashore from a wrecked ship in 1857—uglier but heavier and better beef than gaunt longhorns.

Riding around Lake Austin and on Bay prairie, the young rider saw the Matagorda cows driven back onto the long, narrow reef. Mere boys were faster, more reckless, and equally as skilled as grown riders. The youngsters took unbroken horses off the open pasture, roped, rode and broke them. Unceasing toil, the sleep only of exhaustion, and exertion beyond his strength brought Siringo down with typhoid fever, complicated by malaria. The boy had to go home. That October his mother married one Carrier, from "Yankeedom," who bamboozled the widow and persuaded her to sell her house, one hundred seventy-five acres, and sixty head of cattle for two hundred thirty dollars and go North to Illinois.

Boarding a schooner, they begrudged most leaving their old cow, Brownie, whose milk with mush had been their mainstay during the war years. The scamp foster-father squandered the money,

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but the mother saved a "little pile of gold" she had hoarded against the need of hard times.

"Mother had to pawn her feather mattress and pillow for a month's rent in an old dilapidated frame building on one of the back streets" of St. Louis. A job of shoveling coal at a dollar a day was temporarily earned by the step-father, but "he finally came up missing. Mother was sick in bed at the time from worrying. I went out several times hunting for work, but no one would even give me a word of encouragement, with the exception of an old Jew who said he was sorry for me."

Some eighteen years later, Siringo recorded the privation and hunger of those days.

Everything was white without, for it had been snowing for the past two days. It was about five o'clock in the evening and the piercing cold north wind was whistling through the unceiled walls of our room. Mother was sound asleep, while sister and I sat shivering over an old, broken stove, which was almost cold, there being no fuel in the house.

Sister began crying and wondered why the Lord let us suffer so? I answered that maybe it was because we had quit saying our prayers. Up to the time we left Texas Mother used to make us kneel down by the bedside and repeat The Lord's Prayer every night before retiring. Since then she had, from worrying, lost all interest in heavenly affairs.

"Let us say our prayers now, brother!" said sister, drying the tears from her eyes.

We both knelt down against the old, rusty stove and commenced. About the time we finished the door opened and in stepped Mr. Socks, with a bundle under his arm.

"Here, children, is a loaf of bread and some butter, and I'll bring you a bucket of coal in a few minutes for I suppose from the looks of the stove you are cold," said the good man, who had just returned from his day's work.

Was ever a prayer so quickly heard? We enjoyed the bread and butter, for we hadn't tasted food since the morning before.

On the next day, Charlie began odd-jobbing. He was thirty-one years of age when he wrote that account, living in Caldwell, Kansas, in the midst of the wild, adventurous scenes that distin-

guished him—parading danger and excitement, his own participation in the astonishments of the drive of Texas cattle up the trails—and yet there he describes himself and his sister in the grand simplicity of two children in successful prayer. Unlike in many another description, Siringo made not one word of boast, preachment or jest; after more than fifteen years of desperate, reckless effort, he returned to those dark days of hungry suffering to tell of his own logic and his sister's faith.

His experience regarding the prayer reminded him of his first evening in St. Louis. Gathered in front of a grocery he saw a crowd of men standing around watching two boys fight. The storekeeper saw Charlie coming, and in him the chance to start another display.

"There's a country Jake that I'll bet can lick any two boys of his size in the crowd!" he said.

Being that kind, the men picked two boys, one of about Charlie's size and one smaller, and the shy Texas lad was surrounded, held to the brutal task. When Charlie had the larger lad down, the other picked up a brick-bat and clubbed him. Charlie, despite head blows, stopped that and blacked the smaller lad's eyes. "That ended the fight and I received two ginger-snaps from the big hearted storekeeper, for my trouble," and so Charlie became known as Tex, and wore a black eye to boot.

Carrier was heard from; he sent ten dollars to transport his family to Lebanon, Illinois, where he had a job cutting cordwood seven miles out of town in the woodlot of a farmer named Moore. The step-father celebrated, drank up his wages and advances, and "toward spring the old man got so mean and good-for-nothing that the neighbors had to run him out of the country. A crowd of them surrounded the cabin one night, took the old fellow out and preached him a sermon; then they gave him until morning to either skip or

he hung. You bet he didn't wait until morning."

This far they had managed to keep their furniture, but now the family went to town, the mother seeking work. She left the household goods with the Mucks "where they still remain (sixteen years later) I suppose, if they had not already worn out—nothing worth taking except dishes. I must say the table ware was good; we had gotten them from a Spanish vessel wrecked on the Gulf beach during the war."

Charlie worked for two or three months, and his employer deducted thirty-five dollars that Carrier owed him. With ninety cents coming to him, Charlie, sick with malaria, apprenticed himself to a carpenter to learn the trade and receive board and clothing. He spent one day turning a heavy grind stone on which old, rusty tools were sharpened and polished. That night, knowing all of carpentering he desired, he skipped out.

He found work on the Jacobs farm, twelve miles from Lebanon, but he had a chill every other day, breaking under malaria. He was to get twelve dollars a month and board, but he had to quit. No word had come from his mother and sister since they had left a boarding house job in Lebanon, so Charlie went back to St. Louis. He bought a small satchel for his clothes, a ticket to St. Louis, and with twenty-five cents headed for the big fur trade and outfitting town. He arrived in East St. Louis at midnight with ten cents left, with his only choice—go hungry and buy ferry passage across the Mississippi.

Charlie stated his predicament: "I wasn't very well posted then, in the ways of getting on in the world, or I would have spent my dime for gingerbread and then beat my way across the river."

He paid his fare across on the ferry in the early morning. He put his satchel in a saloon on the levee and searched for Mr. Socks, who might know where his mother

and sister were, but couldn't find him so he "put in the rest of the day gazing through show windows, especially of the bakeries, at the fat pies and cakes."

The lad who was a good cowboy and well able to do a man's work went three days on less than one good meal. A hack driver told him at midday that at midnight, when he knocked off work, he wanted a boy to take care of horses. The boy spent from dusk to near dawn, but the scoundrel joker didn't come. "I was sitting on the edge of the sidewalk, with my face buried in both hands, crying, when some one I thought was a 'peeler' tapped me on my shoulder, but my fears vanished when I looked up into the gleaming countenance of a small, red-complexioned man, who said in a pleasant tone: 'Is there anything I can do for you, my little man?'"

The man brought Charlie to the Planters Hotel, and persuaded the proprietor to make a bell boy of him, at ten dollars a month, a month's wages in advance.

A year as bellboy, receiving from two bits to five dollars a day in tips, brought Charley into conflict with Bell-Boy Jimmie Byron, who called him a liar. The clerk slapped Charlie's face and he quit right there. He had eighteen dollars and went to buy a revolver with which to "get square" with the clerk. He got the gun—but paused on his way back to hunt his victim. He gambled away all his stake, in a ring game.

That brought Charlie to his senses. He headed back to Texas, cadged his way down the Mississippi on the steamboat *Bart Able*, paying his way repairing sacks of grain in the cargo that leaked.

In a way, this start back to Texas led him into a series of experiences of a country boy struggling up to independence and incipient manhood. In Memphis, out on the Walnut Hills, he ran into a pair of juvenile bandits—the beginning of fifty years' experiences with outlaws.

(To be continued)

THE MAN TEN

Bill knocked him down again, and Chandler didn't get up this time.



A man can act
right proddy with
a good woman at
his side—or a fast
gun!

THE day Bill Linn married Vickie Shaw he became ten feet tall and he knew he could lick any man on the High Oregon desert. Not that he had a

secret ambition to lick all humanity in general, for he was by nature a peaceful sort. There was just one fellow he wanted to lick, a gent named Curt Chandler.

By **WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER**

FEET TALL—

It had been working on Bill ever since he'd left Ochoco City under conditions he wanted to forget. It worked mostly in his dreams. Chandler was a mean devil with big hands and a cannon-sized .45 who sat on the foot of Bill's bed every night and had the meanest laugh Bill had ever heard, the kind of laugh that caught hold of his spinal cord and jerked. Bill would sit up in bed just as the devil was swinging his gun barrel down, a cold sweat breaking out all over him. Finally it got so bad he could hear the laugh in the daytime when the strong wind was whistling through the junipers.

When Bill married Vicky he got rid of the devil and his laugh until Johnny Jones showed up riding the grub line. Johnny had been in Ochoco City the day Chandler had pistol-whipped Bill into the street dust in front of Hamil's Bar.

Johnny was the last man Bill wanted to see. Anybody from Ochoco City would have been the last man Bill wanted to see. The instant he saw Johnny, the devil climbed up on the top corral bar and started laughing. Bill had never seen the devil before in the daytime, but he saw him now plain as plain.

He couldn't get rid of the sight.

Johnny let out a squall when he recognized Bill, climbed out of the saddle, and mighty near shook his hand off at the shoulder. "Say, you ain't marked up much. Just got a little scar on your cheek and your nose ain't quite straight where Chandler cracked you with his gun barrel."

Bill's devil got to laughing so hard he almost fell off the corral.

Vicky was on the porch and heard it. Bill never told her how he got the scar and why his nose was sidewaddling the way it was. He told her that night—he had to.

There wasn't a man living who could keep anything from Vicky when she made up her mind to get it out of him.

It did Bill a pile of good just to talk about it. He couldn't stop once he got started. He told her about the devil with the horns and tail, and how his laugh got hold of Bill's spinal cord and jerked. He told her about being ten feet tall after he got married and knowing he could lick any man on the desert. Only now he wasn't sure since he'd seen Johnny.

Vicky looked at him, loving him, and telling him so with her eyes. She asked, "The devil's back right now, isn't he, Bill?"

"Yeah." He wondered how she knew. "Showed up the minute Johnny rode in."

There was a moment's silence.

Vicky rose. "Bill, let's ride into Ochoco City tomorrow. I've got some shopping to do."

Bill didn't want to go to Ochoco City. He didn't want to see the town again. He didn't want to see Curt Chandler again. He didn't want to see the place in front of Hamil's Bar where he'd crawled through the dust.

"Bill, you hear me?"

Bill looked away.

"Yeah, I heard. You go ahead. I'll stay here and auger with Johnny."

"You'd let me ride fifty miles by myself across the desert?" Vicky asked incredulously.

Bill squirmed some then. "Johnny can go with you."

"No. Johnny can stay here and look after things."

He was caught. Nailed to the barn door. Even a man twenty feet tall wouldn't get loose after Vicky had roped and tied him.

"All right," Bill said.

Vicky kissed him and then pulled her

head away so he could see the love in her eyes. "Bill, when we get there don't forget you're ten feet tall and can lick any man on the desert. There's only one way you'll ever get rid of the devil."

Bill saw what Vicky was driving at. He'd be haunted until he licked Curt Chandler. He could do it. He knew he could. He'd just never had what it took to go back and do the job. Not until right then.

They rode into Ochoco City the next day an hour or so before dusk, took a room in the hotel, and Bill put the horses away. When he got back to the hotel Vicky was gone, but there was a note. "First things first, Bill. Remember you're ten feet tall."

Bill took a hitch in his belt and left the hotel in long steps, the kind of steps a man ten feet tall would take. He didn't see his old friends who spoke to him. He shook off a man who wanted to know where he'd been. He went right to Curt Chandler's cabin at the end of the street and walked in.

Chandler didn't seem surprised to see him. He was standing beside the curtain that divided the room, his face paler than Bill remembered it. Then Bill made a discovery. Chandler wasn't a devil. He was just another man who'd caught him in front of Hamil's Bar without a gun and slugged him with his Colt barrel.

Suddenly Bill knew something he hadn't known before. The devil that had been haunting him was a creature that had been born in his own head, a combination of fears and battered pride and imagination.

"I came a piece to lick you, Curt," Bill said. "I aim to do it with my fists. Come on out here."

Chandler said nothing. He stood motionless, staring at Bill, his mouth a sullen down-curling line at the ends. It puzzled Bill for an instant because Chandler had always been a sneering, contemptuous man whose laugh had been as wicked as the devil's. But Bill who was not of a

mind to waste time wondered what was wrong with Chandler.

"If you ain't coming, Curt, I'll give it to you here," Bill said.

Chandler went, slowly, reluctantly, head turned toward the curtain until he was in the street. Then Bill hit him. It was a good tough fight that attracted every man and boy in town, but it was nothing like the time Chandler had pistol whipped Bill. Men who had seen the other ruckus said Bill was a different man, that he fought this time as if he had something to fight for. Might have been ten feet tall, they said, so tall Chandler couldn't reach his chin.

They worked down the street until they got to Hamil's Bar. Then Bill knocked Chandler down. He knocked him down again. That was enough for Chandler. He wouldn't get up, so Bill grabbed him by the collar, hauled him to his feet and flattened him again.

"Crawl," Bill said. "Crawl down the street till you get to your house."

Chandler crawled and the townsmen laughed just as they had once laughed at Bill Linn. Chandler didn't tarry in Ochoco City. He saddled up and left town with a devil that looked like Bill sitting on the saddle horn and laughing in his face.

That night Bill kissed Vicky and held her close and told her she could buy anything she could find in Ochoco City.

"You were wonderful," Vicky whispered, and kissed him again.

She would never tell him that she had been behind the curtain in Chandler's house, a gun in her hand, and that she'd told Chandler he'd make a fair fight out of it or she'd shoot him. She would never know whether Bill won the fight because he fought like a wild man, or if Chandler lost it because he'd been afraid, but it didn't make any difference.

But she was sure of one thing. Bill would never be afraid again. A man ten feet tall couldn't be.

DEAD MAN'S JACKPOT

Houston moved forward as Cranshaw staggered, and delivered bone-crushing blows. . . .



"Two kinds of fools wind up in boothill, amigo . . . those that are too cold-footed to trigger — an' those that are too hot-headed to wait!"

HALTED before the bar entrance on the side gallery of the Nugget House, Jack Houston stared grimly over the arched batwings at the blue-shirted figure elbowed up to the mahogany with a glass of beer in one hand, and a

By KENNETH FOWLER

sandwich in the other. Only a wide, solidly muscled back was visible to Houston, but the homespun blue shirt and flat-crowned miner's hat were unmistakable identification tags when coupled with the fringe of unruly red hair that ruffled out from the rim of the frayed woolen collar.

Houston felt his temper stretch like an over-tight fiddle gut as his attention held for a bleak moment longer on the man's sun-scorched neck; then with an abruptly angry gesture he drove the heel of his palm against the bat-wings and strode decisively to the end of the bar.

The big town sport, he thought with savage irony, and then his hand shot out and squeezed up a fistful of shirt and he yanked the man towards him with a deliberate violence.

"I'll see you outside, Hal," he announced meagerly. "You can clean up on that grub-pile later."

"Jack!" The man with the red hair threw an abrupt, startled look at him; then, slowly, the shock drained out of his blue eyes, and his voice leveled harshly. "What're you doin' in Placertown? I thought you said—"

"The hell with what I said! It's all over camp about you now. Tom Riley rode in last night. He was at Lange's the same time you were."

"That damned old swivel-tongue!"

"Come outside," Houston said flatly. "I'll hear your side of it on the gallery." He reached the swing doors in a half dozen long-gaited strides and drove them apart with a single hard slap of his calloused palm.

He heard Hal's shuffling steps coming reluctantly after him along the gallery, but he made no turning until he reached its deserted far corner. Then, pivoting sharply, his stone-gray eyes fell with a bleak concentration to his brother's tight-set face.

"I just came from Tom Ludlow's, Hal. Damn you, I didn't tell you to take an

option on the place. I told you to buy it."

An angry crimson burned through the tan in Hal Houston's cheeks. "I know what you told me. But Ludlow said what happened; didn't he? His price has gone up to thirty-five hundred."

Jack Houston drew in a cramped breath. "So you figured you'd raise the fifteen hundred difference over at the Legal Tender," he bit out thinly.

Hal Houston met his brother's withering look with a sullen belligerence. "I had a right to gamble with my own half of that dust. I deposited yours with Wells-Fargo, except for the hundred I gave Ludlow for a week's option on the place."

"So you gave Ludlow a hundred—out of *my* thousand." Abruptly, Houston's voice drew taut again. "All right, then. You tell me where I can raise an extra twenty-five hundred in a week."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Jack, lay off me! Maybe if you wasn't so damn' hide-bound and would take a sporting chance—"

"The way you did, I suppose," Houston cut in caustically. "Playing Mike Lange's wheel, then getting so roostered you didn't know whether you were afoot or a-horse-back. And on top of that, getting into a jangle with Nick Cranshaw over that painted-up cutie who's got you dancing on her string over at the Legal Tender."

"You can leave Kate Shannon out of this!" blurted Hal Houston hoarsely. "She ain't no part of it."

"Don't try and lie to me, kid. Cranshaw was going for his gun when the girl stopped him." Houston's voice tensed. "And you're so up to your ears with her, you can't see to spit straight! She's Cranshaw's woman, can't you see that? She just didn't want Cranshaw in a mess over gunning down a kid sucker who's not dry behind the ears yet."

Hal Houston breathed out slowly, "You better shut up, Jack. Kate Shannon ain't what you think she is. She's—"

"You really got it bad, haven't you, kid? Get your horse and ride back to the claim. I'll meet you there."

Hal Houston's narrow jaws knotted stubbornly. "I ain't goin' back, Jack. I've taken your bossin' long enough. Pay me off for my half of the claim and we'll call it quits."

"I'll pay you off when I'm damned good and ready. But not so you can throw the money away on that doll-face at Mike Lange's. Get your horse. I'm telling you, kid."

"I ain't ridin' no place. And you ain't makin' me."

Houston's jaw clamped. "Cranshaw's bad medicine, kid. And this Kate Shannon's just playing you for a sucker. You couldn't handle a woman like that, even if Cranshaw'd let you."

Hal Houston flared: "Maybe you could, you're so damned wide around the britches! Damn it, Jack, I'm sick and tired of grubbin' along for a lousy dollar a pan a day, up there at Spanish Bar. I can take care of myself, and I won't ask no odds of you, doin' it."

"Not till you're stony broke, you won't." Houston's voice deadened with finality. "Okay, kid, you can see me when you come to your senses. But I'm warnin' you—stay out of the Legal Tender. Let me catch you there again, and I'll bounce you out on the seat of your pants."

Heeling around abruptly, Houston held a rein to his anger until he hit the board walk. It exploded inside him then like a bursting dam, and heading blindly upstreet he had only a dim half-awareness of Hal standing there on the Nugget House gallery, yelling some angrily taunting challenge after him.

He had always been more like a father than an older brother to Hal. Ever since their own father had died, when Hal was only thirteen, he'd looked out for the kid, had taken Hal with him wherever he'd gone. But now Hal was nearly twenty,

and if he was ever going to settle down, now was the time.

Suddenly he thought of Jim Leeson, who operated the claim adjoining the Houstons', at Spanish Bar. Returning from a trip to town, a couple weeks ago, Leeson had dropped him a guarded hint about Hal and the Shannon woman. And three days later, Houston had made his decision. Pete Ludlow was putting his mercantile up for sale, and the price was reasonable enough—two thousand cash. Why not buy out Ludlow and set up in a good-paying business in town, where he could keep a closer eye on Hal and get him away from the gambling fever that, sooner or later, caught hold of everybody out here at the diggings?

Accordingly, learning a few days later that Leeson and Tom Riley were wagon-driving to town to buy provisions, he had decided to send Hal with them, with instructions to turn their combined poke of two thousand dollars' worth of dust over to Lawyer Abe Sondschein. Sondschein could draw up the necessary bill of sale for the store, he had figured, and wrap up the deal with all the necessary legal formalities. And letting the kid ride in with the dust might give him a feeling of importance and responsibility—a feeling of being a big wheel in the deal. And now, this. . . .

HOUSTON had been striding along abstractedly without any special consciousness of a destination; but now, reaching Sugar Pine Street, he halted suddenly. The house on the corner was a large, square-built structure of dingy gray, but a neat white picket fence enclosed it, and the sign on the gate read:

MRS. MCCRARY. ROOMS AND BOARD.
DAY OR WEEK.

Houston remembered, now, having been told this was the time of day he would most likely find her here. But now, his finger on the latch of the gate, he hesi-

tated briefly. Would what he planned to do help Hal, or only make matters worse? A fresh spurt of anger ran through him, and he suddenly realized he was as much past reason in this thing, now, as Hal was. Abruptly, he thumbed up the latch and started up the narrow path leading to the veranda. At the front door, he rapped back-handedly against the top panel several times with clipped, angry strokes of his knuckles.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, the door swung open, and a pretty, black-haired girl in a dress of yellow calico stood framed in the aperture.

"Yes?" Her smile lighted a slim, pleasantly pert-looking face, and Houston's mind cupped the thought: *About Hal's age. Now why couldn't it have been a girl like this?*

He answered the smile with a faint grin of his own. "I'm pretty sure you're not Mrs. McCrary. But maybe you could tell me if Miss Shannon is in."

"No, I'm Helen McCrary. Mother's out." The girl held open the door. "But won't you come in? Kate has a caller, but I think she'll be through in a minute, if you'd care to wait."

Houston stepped into a wide, cool hallway, and Helen McCrary nodded to a settle. "Make yourself comfortable," she said. "I'll tell Kate you're here."

Houston heard voices, and presently saw a man and woman emerge from a side doorway leading off the hallway. Houston heard the woman say, "It's no use, Nick. I'll give Mike all the time he needs, but I don't want any more of it."

"Mike don't want time," the man said. "He wants you. You better think this over, Kate. No need of your gettin' on the prod just because—"

"I'll talk to Mike, Nick. That's all I'm going to say right now."

The man was chunky and wide-shouldered, Houston noted, with powerful biceps and a blondly florid face. "Well,

I got to mosey along," he said. "We'll talk this over tonight—the three of us."

He started down the hallway towards the door, and Houston turned to the girl. "Miss Shannon?"

"Why yes, I'm Kate Shannon." She was tall and slender, Houston saw, her pallid cheeks slightly indented under high cheekbones; and her attractiveness was striking, rather than pretty. She regarded him unsmilingly. "You wanted to see me?"

"My name is Houston," Houston said, and was aware that the man called Nick had stopped suddenly, with his hand on the door, and was looking back at him with a fixed, deliberate interest.

The girl said in a sharply dismissive voice, "Tonight, Nick," and then, as the man abruptly opened the door and stepped out on the veranda, she looked back at Houston.

"So you're Hal Houston's brother," she surmised. She spoke in a tired, faintly husky voice. "What was it you wanted to see me about?"

Houston gave her the cold, steady attention of his granite-colored eyes. She had on a dress of some soft dove-gray material, and the blue silk cummerbund gathering her narrow waist gave a tight pull to her bodice, molding her full, boldly sculptured bosom. A shaft of sunlight spearing through the top glass of the door caught on her softly waved hair, highlighting its unusual, fawn-colored tinge.

"I wanted to see you about Hal," said Houston bluntly. "Stay away from him. I don't want to see him get hurt."

The girl neither flinched from his words nor took them wholly equably. "I'm not good at taking orders, Mr. Houston," she retorted crisply. "Tell Hal to stay away from me. I didn't start that."

"I don't give a damn who started it. Stay away from him," Houston repeated flatly.

Kate Shannon's cool, ash-gray eyes nar-

rowed hostilely. "Anybody can come to the Legal Tender and hear me sing, Mr. Houston. All it costs is the price of a drink. It might cost more to insult me."

Staring down into her pale, arresting face, a faint uncertainty put its hold on Houston.

"What it cost Hal," he said meagerly, "was a thousand dollars worth of dust. We'd been planning to buy out Ludlow, with part of that money. We're not welshing on anything, but the kid had no right to play that stake."

"But you, of course, have the right to come here and speak to me as you would to a common gold-digger." The girl's tight, undeviating glance stung color into Houston's leathery cheeks. "Hal took a chance," she added with cold scorn. "You'd have turned down the money, I suppose, if he'd been lucky."

"Nobody but a fool takes chances like that," Houston said harshly.

"Perhaps there are two kinds of fools, Mr. Houston. Those who are too cold-footed to take a chance, and those who aren't."

"Thanks for the sermon," Houston said. He turned and went to the door. "I'll consider the source," he added with chilled malice, and glancing back as he opened the door, saw her still standing there behind him, her mouth rigidly compressed, her eyes frozen on him with a look of angry challenge.

He moved out through the doorway and stepped down to the veranda. A voice came at him flatly, "Just a minute, Houston," and he swung, startled, to stare at the man who had been talking with Kate Shannon in the hallway.

"My name's Cranshaw," the man said. "You're Hal Houston's brother?"

Houston gave him a level stare. "That's right."

"Take a message to him for me," Cranshaw said. "Tell him to get out of Placer-town and stay out. He ain't wanted here."

Houston bridled. "You're the marshal here, I suppose?"

"I'm floor boss for Mike Lange. That's enough for anybody in these parts."

Houston stared hard into Cranshaw's bleak, narrowly spaced eyes. "It's not enough for me, friend."

Cranshaw gripped his arm. "I'll widen that a little. You ride out, too," Cranshaw said.

"Let go of my arm," Houston said, mildly.

Cranshaw gripped it tighter. "We don't want your cheap tin-belly trade from the diggings, Houston. Squirts like that snuffy-nosed kid brother of yours got a lot to learn before they—"

Cranshaw held Houston's left arm; Houston yanked abruptly, and at the same instant his right hand went down, then arced up, knuckled and deadly. The powerful blow caught Cranshaw on the side of the jaw and his head jerked like a marionette's as he staggered back, slamming violently against one of the veranda uprights.

Cranshaw's breath spurted, and for a bare instant he stared at Houston with a dumb look of astonishment. Then, throwing his chunky body into violent forward movement, he drove at Houston with an uncontrollable fury. His first wild blow skidded glancingly off Houston's chin, but Houston easily parried the next two and ducking a fourth, abruptly shot a fist into Cranshaw's cushioned belly.

Cranshaw gasped, and lowering his bull-like shoulders, tried to butt. Side-stepping, Houston clouted him on the ear, and then, as Cranshaw staggered blindly, he hit him again, a terrible, bone-crushing blow, full in the mouth.

A bleeding hulk, Cranshaw teetered briefly at the top of the veranda stairs before he lost balance completely and went rolling down, his squat body hollowly thumping each board. He was just picking himself up as Houston leisurely

reached the bottom step and strolled across to him.

Still groggy from shock, he stood with his short arms dangling limply as Houston took his gun and threw it back over his shoulder into some bushes. "Now I'll give you a little advice," Houston said tightly. "Keep away from my brother. We'll ride out of Placertown when we damned well feel like it. And the next time you come straddlin' down the road, keep out of my way."

Cranshaw swiped a hand across his smashed mouth, his eyes fastened on Houston with a chilled-steel brightness.

"Mister, the next time I come straddlin' down the road, I'll have my hand close to a gun butt. And that's where you'd better have yours."

"I'll remember that," Houston said, grimly. "Maybe you'd have the guts to shoot a man front-side, but I doubt it."

Houston wheeled around and was headed up the path to the board walk. Reaching it, he paused and glanced back. Cranshaw had gone over to the bushes and was pawing around in them, hunting for his gun.

Houston turned and started upstreet, towards the Nugget House. His legs had an odd, brittle feeling, carrying him along. He was no gun-fighter, but he was going to have to be one, now. Sooner or later, picking his own time and place, Cranshaw would come looking for him.

Houston thought of Kate Shannon, and a slow anger tightened inside him. If there was an explosion, she would be the spark that had set it off. She wasn't beautiful; her face, with its high, sharp cheekbones and soft, gray eyes, was barely pretty, and yet there was some subtle female alchemy there that drew men to her as inevitably as a magnet drew steel shavings.

Seductive—maybe that was the word for her. And he had never seen hair of that exact off-color shade of fawn. Good

Lord, thought Houston suddenly, *me too!* and he abruptly quickened his gait, angrily trying to pinch her picture from his mind. What was it she had told him? *There are two kinds of fools, Mr. Houston. Those who are too cold-footed to take a chance, and those who aren't.* By God, maybe she was right. Everything was a gamble: a man's work, his women, life itself. And now Nick Cranshaw would never rest until he had planted a slug between his shoulder blades. What would he have to lose?

Houston felt oddly light-headed as he raked in the last pot. He felt drunk, and he hadn't had a drink all night. Two thousand dollars in cold cash—all his. He glanced around the thronged dance hall. On the stage, beyond the gambling layouts and the long cherrywood bar, Kate Shannon was finishing her last number. The spangles of her short ruffled skirt glittered like silver in the flare of the coal oil lamps, and her long slim legs, tight in black silk stockings, gave her a fetching, wanton air as she paraded up and down in front of the footlights, her high-heeled silver slippers clicking like castanets.

Houston drew in a tight breath, stirred in spite of himself. At the same time, he was conscious of a grudging admiration. Her voice was a mellow, cello-like contralto that went down deep into a man and brought an ache to the heart. The applause was deafening as she finished. Something new. A new song called *Just A Bird In A Gilded Cage*. She was that all right, Houston thought somberly. And probably tonight there was not a man in the house but wished he had the magic key to unlock it. Did that go for him, too? he wondered abruptly.

"Thank you, gentlemen." Houston rose watchfully from the poker table, stuffing his winnings carefully into the deep side pocket of his black whipcord jeans. "I

think I'll call it a night. A man's foolish to press his luck too far."

Two of the men seated at the table with Houston were cattlemen. They were big, glum-looking men, but neither voiced objection as he patted his bulging pocket, preparing to turn away. The third player, however, a professional gambler with a long saturnine face and dark, quick-stabbing eyes, thrust his voice at Houston with a sudden flat vehemence.

"Maybe you'd be foolish not to press your luck, friend," he suggested thinly. "You haven't broke the bank here—yet."

Houston laid his flat stare on the man. "That was my last round, Degerman. I've made my big casino. Now I'm through."

A voice from behind Houston said: "Sit down, Houston. Give Degerman his chance. It's the house rule."

Wheeling abruptly, Houston saw the blue glitter of the Colt first, then the squat, barrel-chested figure of the man behind it. Nick Cranshaw's beady little eyes were fixed on him with a bleak impassivity, and two paces behind Cranshaw stood Mike Lange, long arms thrust into the pockets of his black broadcloth breeches, his thin, sallow face quirked in a coldly humorless smile.

"Better obey the house rule, Houston," Lange suggested dryly. "Fair for one is fair for all."

Houston's glance shuttled from Lange to Cranshaw, then back to Degerman. Degerman's right hand was up, flat against his flowered waistcoat, and Houston knew how quick that hand could go thrusting down, to close on the deadly little derringer that undoubtedly lay concealed there.

My lucky day, thought Houston ironically, and shifted his glance back to where Lange and Cranshaw stood, rigid as two statues, watching him.

The irony reached into his voice: "I'd hate to see your house lose a dollar,

Lange," and he was starting back towards the empty chair when the voice seemed to spring at him, out of nowhere.

"I wouldn't be in that big a hurry, Jack. Stand tracked, Cranshaw! You twitch a whisker and I'll—"

Belatedly, Houston realized his mistake in withdrawing his eyes from Hans Degerman. The report of Degerman's hide-out gun was no more than a brittle crack, but Houston saw his brother Hal sway slightly, then, as Nick Cranshaw swiveled his big peacemaker, saw him fire once, his gun slanting down.

To Houston, there was no accurately remembered sequence of action, after that. Hal's face, stiff and dead-white, was a blurred mask, receding from him; Cranshaw was bent at one knee, and seemed about to crumple. Whirling, Houston saw Degerman's derringer swinging to take him in, and from a corner of one eye, he saw one of the cattlemen reaching down. He was surprised at his own quickness as he drew and fired.

Degerman jerked back in his chair, the derringer clattering to the table top. At the same instant, Houston saw the cattleman's gun come up, pointed at the lights.

The shots came in jerky bursts, but before the last light blinked out, Houston had a fuzzy awareness of Cranshaw swinging wobblingly around, his gun bearing on Hal, and he launched himself at the man with a reckless fury.

Like a great bear, in the darkness, Cranshaw threw him off, then, wheeling clumsily, clamped him in a deadly embrace. He felt a crushing weight against his lungs; he brought up his knee in a savage lunge and drove it into Cranshaw's groin. He heard Cranshaw's breath suck in, felt Cranshaw stagger away from him. He leaped forward, and in the confusion and darkness, his stretching arms reached out at emptiness.

Something blunt and heavy swished the air, and he felt a blow against his temple,

cutting down across his ear. A dizzying pain swept him, and he had a sense of hazy darkness rushing towards him. He took a bending step, then, from some remote cavern of consciousness, a voice percolated dimly through the hollow roaring in his ears.

"This way, quick! It's your only chance."

A heady perfume caught at his nostrils as he recognized Kate Shannon's voice, and he twisted around, conscious of a feathery uncertainty at his knee-joints.

"Hal," he muttered dazedly. "Hal was—"

The girl's tense whisper cut him off. "Hal's all right. Nick's bullet just grazed his arm. You've got to hurry!"

Her hand was on his arm, clutching it fiercely, pulling him away. Groggily, he started to follow. He caught another whiff of her perfume, heard the starched rustle of her frothy skirt. Abruptly, someone pushed between them and he stumbled across an overturned chair. A bomb-shell of light exploded inside his head. Then darkness came rushing in.

HE NEVER knew how he'd gotten out in the alley. It was an alley two doors upstreet from the Legal Tender, between a boarded-up feed store and an unlighted storehouse for miners' equipment. His head was resting back on a pile of rubbish, and when he drunkenly straightened, pain burst in his head like a sheet of flame. He came unsteadily to his feet and peered vaguely into the gloom, his mind a complete blank momentarily.

Moved by a purely mechanical impulse, he started towards the street end of the alley, weaving a little, his head throbbing with each uncertain step. Suddenly memory flooded back and he halted, stabbing a hand into the pocket of his breeches. His thrusting fingers plunged against emptiness. The stake he had won at the Legal Tender was gone!

Kate Shannon! She had taken it, of course, and like a blind fool he had walked right into the trap she had set for him. A slow anger burned through him, followed by a sick feeling of despair. He had weighed her protestations with regard to Hal, and against his more sober judgment had been almost inclined to accept them. But it was fully plain, now, that she had been lying to him. The woman was a conscienceless harpy, without the slightest semblance of any moral stability. And for a few seconds back there tonight he had let himself be buffaloeed by her as easily as Hal had been.

He cursed, bitterly, under his breath. First Hal, and now, him. A pair of blind, gullible greenhorns! And he had blamed Hal, who after all was only a kid, with all the normal healthy instincts of a youth of his age. But he, at least, was old enough to tell a gentlewoman from a painted dance hall girl. At his age, it was time a man thought of settling down, time he began looking around for the right kind of a partner. Good Lord, had he been letting his imagination run wild in thinking a woman like Kate Shannon could ever fill such a role?

A sick disgust filled him as he started towards the mouth of the alley. He took two steps, then halted abruptly. A faint rustling sound drew his attention, pulled his nerves suddenly taut. Then he saw the shadowy figure stepping down from the board walk and moving uncertainly towards the alley. He flattened himself back against the wall of the feed store, his palm down, braced against the gun at his hip.

He heard the rustling again. Then a voice came, tensely, urgently through the dark channel of the alley.

"Jack! Jack Houston! Are you in there?"

Kate Shannon's voice! Ramrod-stiff, he held his body back against the shingled wall of the feed store, waiting with

a grim expectancy. If this was some kind of a trick, he didn't intend to be caught napping a second time.

The voice came again, lifted sharply, pitched to an almost angry vehemence.

"Jack Houston! Answer me, if you're there!"

The stark note of panic in the voice reached to inner depth in Houston that was beyond reason, and he had only a vague half-awareness of his action as he stepped away from the wall and sent his voice through the darkness towards her.

"This way," he called softly, and instantly wondered how he could be such a fool. He heard the rustling sound again, and then he saw her coming towards him, her long skirts like a flowing shadow, her face a pale disk in the dimness.

"Jack! Where are you? It's clear out here. You'd better—"

Houston never knew whether some sixth sense had warned him, or whether he had actually heard the sound behind him—a soft, padded sound, a furtive foot-step. He spun around, and at the same instant the shot hammered flatly, threw a harsh blare of echoes against the trended wallway of the alley. A finger of flame jabbed the darkness and the bullet whistled past him inches from his face. He threw himself to the ground and fired at the flash.

Dimly, now, he could make out the stack of rubbish piled at the rear of the alley, and even as he watched flame spouted from the pile and grit spurted, stinging up into his face. He spat and levered out his arm, steadying the Colt, waiting. The six-shooter chocked in his fist was steady as a rock as the third shot blared. He fired with a cool deliberation, and had the instant grim satisfaction of seeing a lanky shape rear up abruptly out of the murky dark.

Houston had the shadow full in his sights when it seemed suddenly to dissolve. He saw it topple backward, heard

a crash of smashed crating. Then there was nothing; nothing, and, for the moment, only the thunders of an aching, total silence.

He glanced around, but could see nothing of the girl. *Did her job*, he thought with a savage contempt, and moving cautiously along the feed store wall he reached the stack of rubbish and the limp figure sprawled across the top of it. The face was turned upward, and a cold shock douched through Houston. A thin spray of moonlight found a channel here, and in its wan glow Houston startledly looked down into the glassy, dead eyes of Mike Lange.

Lange! And he had expected to find Nick Cranshaw. Cranshaw! Cranshaw could be out hunting him right now. Or—

Jerking around, his heart looped up and struck a thudding blow against his ribs. Was that a shadow, edging along the wall back there? He sucked in a tight breath and stood motionless, feeling clammy sweat ooze from the palm he had clamped around the walnut butt of his Colt.

The shattering roar of the shot, the swift gash of flame cutting the dark, caught him momentarily flat-footed, and then he felt it—a blunt, stunning shock, like a mallet blow against his left shoulder. He lifted his arm and pumped a bullet, realizing belatedly that his target had shifted, and that he had missed.

Abruptly, pain exploded up through his shoulder, and a kind of warm mist spread before his eyes, hanging rosily. He started to back up, but it seemed suddenly as if his body had no substance, and he was aware of a peculiar floating sensation. Another bright flare of flame gouted out at him and he felt a jarring concussion against the side of his head. His knees buckled, but by a grim effort of will he held himself erect and tried to lift the unbearable weight of the gun in his hand.

He saw a single squat shadow detach itself from the thick shadow mass alongside the wall and move forward vaguely.

"I got three left, Houston," Nick Cranshaw's voice struck across at him mockingly, out of the dark. "I'll make the next one a gut shot."

Houston made a desperate last effort. But the shot roared out before he could get his gun hip-high, and he braced himself in anticipation. With vague wonder, he felt nothing. Instead, he saw Nick Cranshaw lurch around drunkenly, like a man groping in a strange darkness, and then Cranshaw had his gun up and fired again—towards the mouth of the alley!

Instantly, two more shots pounded and Cranshaw bent suddenly, clutching at his belly, then pitched forward and fell in a loose crumple in the center of the alley.

A dizzy nausea swept Houston. He took two faltering steps before his knees gave way. He had a moment's curious awareness of a voice calling to him, a voice that sounded strangely like his brother Hal's, but he knew that must be part of the nightmare, and it faded gently as he went on down, down into warm, enveloping blackness.

THE voice Houston heard was gruffly matter-of-fact. "He'll be all right in another three, four days. Keep him in bed and feed him light. I'll look in again tomorrow."

Blinking open his eyes, he was in time to see the back of a short, dumpy little man with a black bag retreating through a white-painted doorway. He stared around him wonderingly. He was in a bedroom, a woman's bedroom, judging from its frilly foofoo and the faint lavender scent that pervaded it, and now, swinging his glance from the big four-poster bed on which he was lying, he surprisedly saw his brother Hal seated in a chair beside the room's double window, grinning across at him smugly.

"Doc said you'd be coming around pretty soon," Hal said. "And don't start naggin' me for not goin' back to the claim. Lucky for you I didn't."

Weakly, Houston returned his brother's conceited grin. "Maybe I've been a mite tough with you, kid, but don't go gettin' too wide around the britches. What happened back there tonight?"

Hal grunted. "Plenty. After the ruckus in the Legal Tender I saw Lange and Cranshaw with their heads together, and when Lange went to his office and Cranshaw walked out the front door, I had to make a quick decision. So I trailed after Cranshaw. I didn't see you anywhere, and I didn't know till later that Kate Shannon had had one of the boys carry you out to that alley. But Lange and Cranshaw must have gotten wind of it and saw a chance to get you out of the way for keeps. That's about all," he summed up shortly. "You got Lange. I got Cranshaw."

"And the girl got the money," put in Houston, bitterly. "Maybe you can see now, Hal, why I—"

Before he could finish, the white batten door swung open and Kate Shannon stepped into the room. Houston stared at her. The girl's left arm lay cradled in a sling; her right was held out to him—filled with a tightly rolled wad of banknotes.

"I tried to give you this out in the alley tonight," she told him with a quiet gravity, "but I guess you thought it was some kind of a trick. You'll find it all there—I took it out of your pocket when you fell. If I hadn't, one of Mike Lange's rowdies would have grabbed it. They've been well trained for the job."

Dumbstruck, Houston stared at the money, then swung his glance up to the girl's calm, steady gray eyes.

"I reckon I owe you an apology, ma'am," he blurted out finally. "I made a bad mistake. I thought—"

Abruptly, his glance fell to her bandaged arm; at a point midway up her forearm, the bandage showed a bright stain of blood.

"You took that bullet Lange meant for me," he muttered wonderingly.

"And like any woman, I had to go and faint," Kate Shannon said, almost apologetically. "But it's only a flesh wound, Doctor Hancock said."

"And you came out there tonight to try and warn me." Houston stared, fascinated, into her gray eyes, up to her fawn-colored hair. His glance swung to Hal, then back to the girl. "I don't know how serious this is," he murmured, "between you and Hal, but if it is that way—"

Kate Shannon laughed through his words, a soft, pleasantly husky laugh that swiftly rekindled a dream in Houston's thoughts.

"Hal and me! Why, I told you that was just—" She stopped, blushing. "I'm a widow, Mr. Houston. I have a little girl, three years old. Hal is just a boy." She looked down at him, smiling. "A nice boy, though—although I'm afraid he's still got a lot to learn about women."

The door opened suddenly and Helen McCrary thrust her curly black head through the doorway. She smiled pertly and said, "I put Janie to bed for you, Kate. She was good as gold. You'd better get some sleep yourself, now. I'm giving you my room, for tonight. Mother had to go to Goldville for a few days. I'll use hers."

Kate Shannon said, "I hate to put you out, Helen. But I do appreciate it."

Houston's glance crossed to Helen McCrary. She was looking at Hal, and Hal was looking at her, and reading the exchange, Houston thought of the possibility and sighed contentedly.

Helen McCrary had the door opened, now, and was looking back over her shoulder. "I'll be down in the kitchen," she said, "if anybody wants a cup of coffee."

Abruptly, Hal rose. "Did you say jamoka, ma'am? I'm your huckleberry, if you could spare an extry cup."

Houston smiled up at Kate Shannon, when they had gone. "Doesn't take much to start it, does it?"

She looked down at him soberly. "No. And sometimes it's right, and sometimes not. It's a gamble—like everything else in life."

Houston's eyes searched her, set with a quiet gravity. "I gambled tonight, on your advice. It brought me luck. I hope you'll be lucky too, from here out."

"Who knows?" Kate Shannon shrugged. "I was like Hal, when I married Ben Templer. He owned the Legal Tender—or thought he did, until it began to own him. He was killed in a gun fight. It left me alone, with Jeanie."

Houston tried to raise up in the bed suddenly, but a spurt of pain put him back on the pillow, his face twisted in a grimace.

"You mustn't try anything like that right away," Kate Shannon warned gently. "Doctor Hancock said you'd need a full week of rest."

"But this is your room," protested Houston. "I can't—"

"Fiddlesticks! Helen's room is just down the hallway. And you're going to need a nurse."

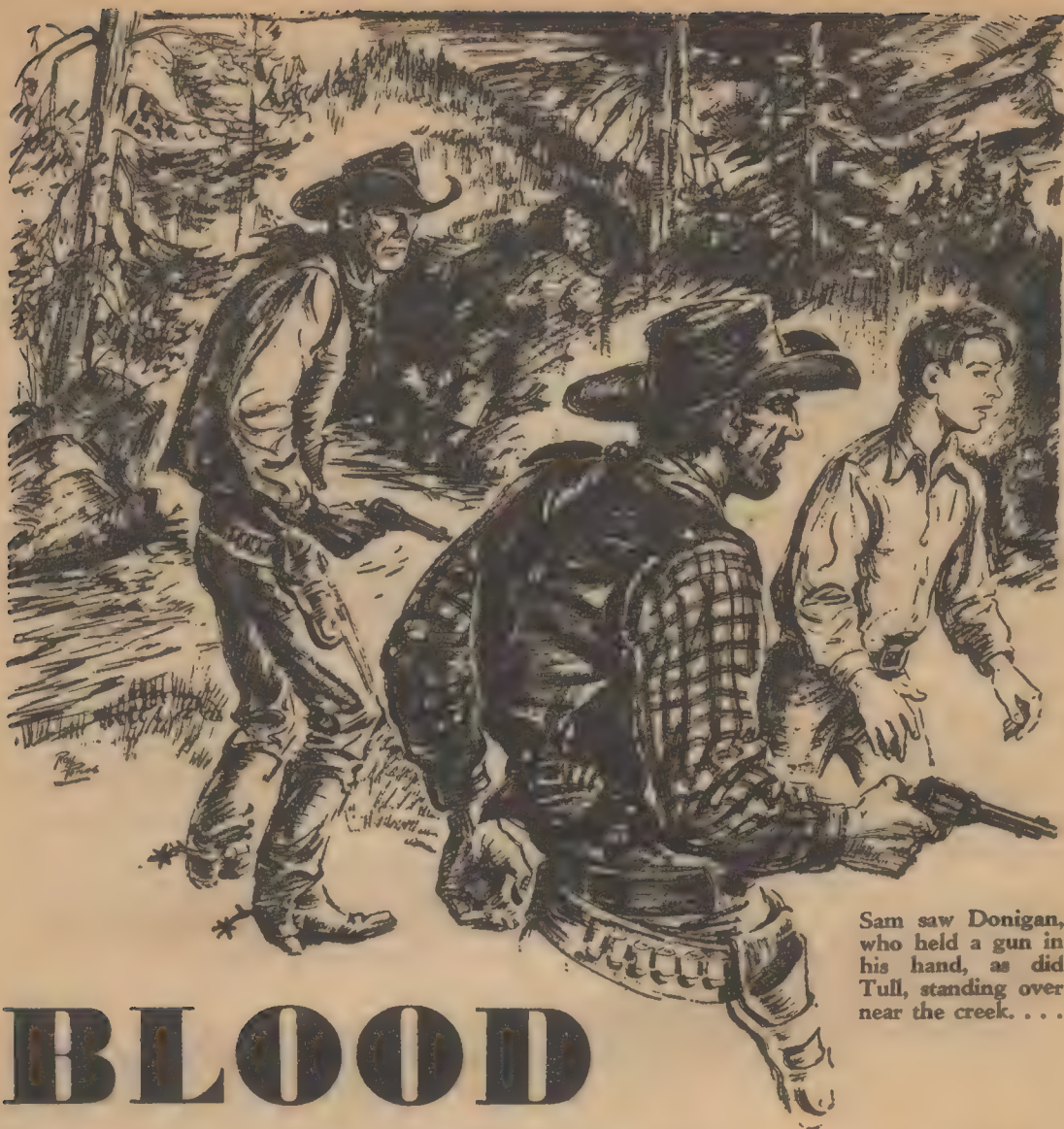
"You, I hope."

Kate Shannon went to the door. There she turned, smiling back at him. "Gambling's risky, Mr. Houston."

Houston grinned. "I'm just practicing what you preached. I'll take a chance."

A long sigh went out of him after she was gone, and despite the dull throbbing in his shoulder, he felt oddly relaxed, curiously more contented than he had felt in a long time. Kate . . . Kate and Jeanie.

Houston closed his eyes. It was long past the time he should be striking roots, someplace. Idly, he wondered what time it was. He hoped morning wasn't too many hours away.



Sam saw Donigan, who held a gun in his hand, as did Tull, standing over near the creek. . . .

BLOOD

By
GIFF
CHESHIRE

CALL

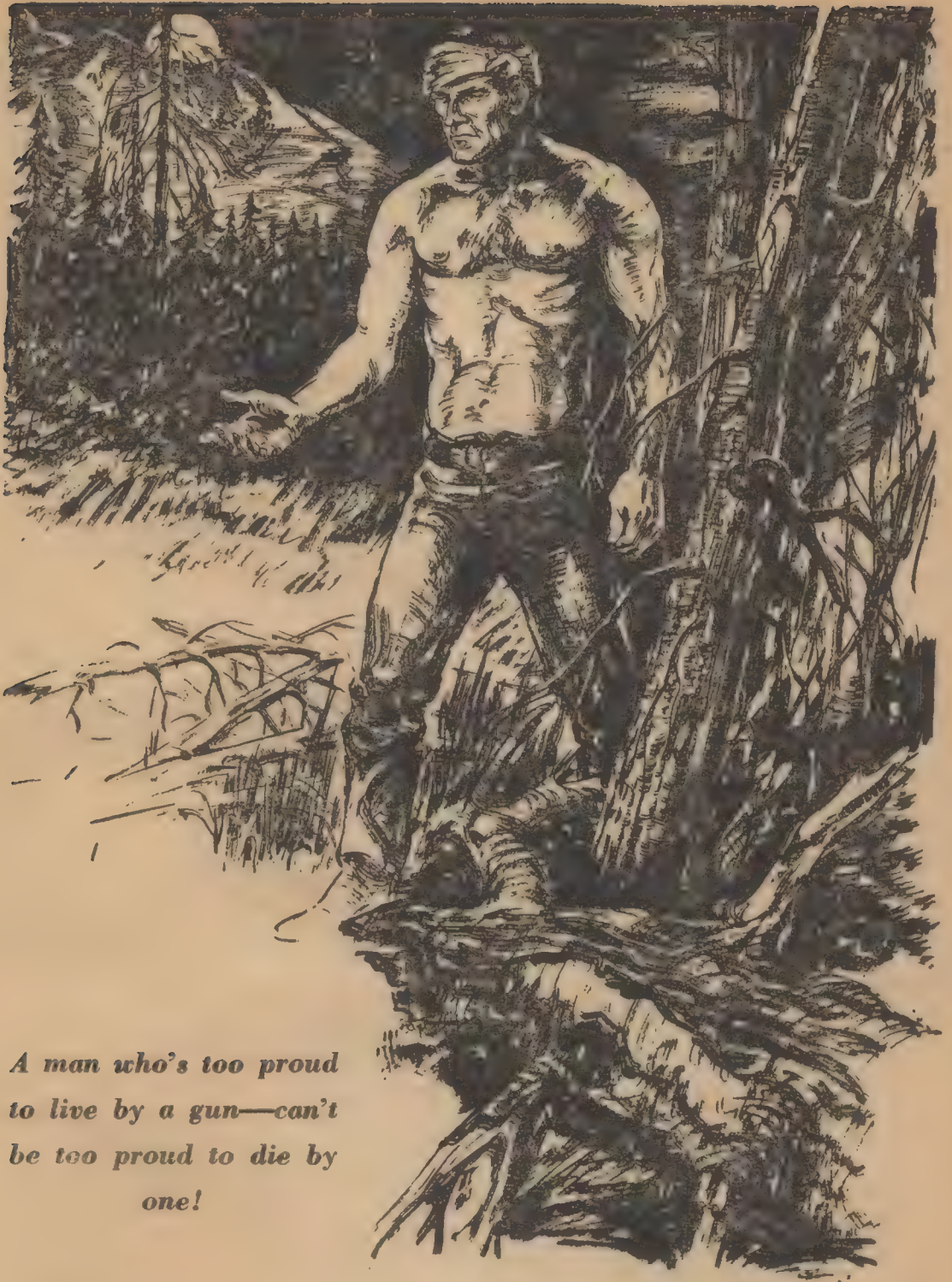
CHAPTER ONE

Killer's Trail

IT SEEMED to Sam Benton that the gray of dawn touching the cabin windows seeped on through his body. He still wore his hat, and starting stubble rasped the fingers sliding unconsciously along his heavy jaw. Kip's jackknife, the

bone handle cracked exactly the way Sam remembered it, lay with Jape Donigan's note on the table before him.

If he or Spence had only found it somewhere up the creek in their night-long search for a lost boy of ten! They had found nothing but the emptiness of the wastelands along the upper west fork of Althouse Creek. They had come in emp-



*A man who's too proud
to live by a gun—can't
be too proud to die by
one!*

ty-handed just now because of Mary, Sam's wife and Spence's sister, and Mary was waiting with Kip's knife. Its big blade had been opened and closed, so as to fold

a tear of paper into the handle. It had thumped against the door, Mary said, just before daybreak.

Sam lifted the dirty tatter of brown

wrapping paper again, though one reading had burned it into his mind:

Benton: Turn Ossie Tull loose. Then your kid'll come home with his fish. Donigan.

Sam Benton swallowed. It was a masterpiece of understatement. It was irrefutable, for it had seemed exceedingly strange to him that Kip, going out alone yesterday afternoon to fish the upper creek, could have lost himself in country he knew like the palm of his hand. That he could be hurt and helpless somewhere when he had as much self-reliance as any grown man in Browntown.

Kip had fallen into Donigan's hands. Sam could not yet grasp the full import of it. In the first place, he had not dreamed of an attempt like this or he would never have let Kip go out alone. Self-rebuke bit sharply into him.

Jape Donigan was nothing if not insolent, as evidenced by his putting his name boldly to his communication. He operated openly against the gold camps, expressmen and transients from the Trinity to the Rogue, defying organized law to stop him, leaving a bloody trail behind him. And two days ago, operating through Sam Benton, the elected *alcalde* in this mining camp of Browntown, organized law had taken Donigan's right-hand man, the reptilian Ossie Tull.

Tull was locked up here in camp, waiting trial by a miners' court. In all probability, another dusk would have seen him hung. Yes, Sam Benton told himself, he should have guessed this.

There was the rattle of dishes in the kitchen, and frustration turned him. Mary, who likewise had been up through the night, was preparing breakfast. The low, ragged talk between her and Spence Hendrix, her brother, had fallen away. Sam went into the kitchen, removing his hat now and pegging it on the wall.

Spence sat at the table, his weight on

his elbows, staring at the flowered cloth. His eyes met Sam's, and he looked quickly away, shaking his head.

"Sam," Mary said, and she paused while her eyes searched his. "Sam, what will you do?"

He placed a big hand lightly on her slender shoulder. Kip's fine-featured good looks came from her, his wide brown eyes. Sam turned her question in his mind. The tongue in him never had had the delicacy of his thoughts. He saw the struggle in her mind that was fear for Kip, that was her head agreeing with her brother, her heart agreeing with her husband.

"Tull stands trial and hangs—if that's the court's verdict."

Mary's eyes dropped with her shoulders. She was frying griddle cakes on the stove's hot, glistening top, and she turned them mechanically.

Sam heard Spence's fist hit the table. "Damme, Sam, if you put it to the camp, they'd tell you to turn Tull loose! So would the miners' court you appointed! With the record Jape Donigan's made, does anybody doubt he'll kill Kip if we hang Tull?"

Sam turned toward his brother-in-law, shaking his head. "Don't reckon anybody doubts it, Spence."

Though there was deep friendship and many qualities common between them, they were not alike. Spence Hendrix was younger than Sam, younger even than Mary. He had the swift, supple strength of a whip, and a flashing temper to back it. He showed no fatigue from the night's grueling search in the upcountry, but he showed concern and spilling hate against the likes of Donigan.

Sam Benton was a big man, with slower, steadier power. Though they called him Peaceful Sam, they had elected him to the post of law and order in this sprawling mining camp. Only Sam knew that his big fist could drop a steer, that his

finger was deadly on a trigger. Though men sensed this, Sam Benton never explained why a man so endowed should work so quietly, so gently.

No one but Sam knew the full truth of how he had taken Ossie Tull. It had been no different from the things Brown-town had witnessed when Peaceful Sam broke up a rowdies' fight, disarmed a trigger-happy drunk, or locked up a criminal. By simply going ahead with it, unafraid and somehow dominating the situation. Men saw these things and marveled, and unconsciously laid it to the power and latent danger in him. Sam Benton had a pronounced distaste for conflicts, but when it was forced upon him, he met it as incisively as he could. Often he turned others' weaknesses against themselves, avoiding violence.

He had taken Ossie Tull through the man's own insolent daring. An express runner, coursing from Browntown to Crescent City, had been murdered and robbed of considerable gold dust on Smith river. The deed had born the plain, bragging brand of the Donigan bunch, which, out of the mountain fastness, struck anywhere from Yreka to Crescent City, from the Rogue to Trinity River.

NO ONE had known who Ossie Tull was, at first. The man had ridden into camp two days before to freshen his evil spirit in its fleshpots. It had been a girl in Axtell's deadfall who had begun to build a wonder from the bits of information that, launched on a drunk, the man had dropped. Finally she had conveyed them to Axtell, who brought them to Sam.

Sam Benton had gone unarmed to the man's room at the hotel. He was made sure of the suspicions when, though admitted, he found himself staring into the muzzle of a gun. Ossie Tull was lean and tall and incredibly young. He was swaying drunk, and the viciousness in him

glittered brightly in his grinning eyes.

"What do you want, fella?"

"Put away the toy," Sam said calmly. "I'm arresting you for murder."

"What murder?"

"Murder in general. You're a Donigan man, aren't you?"

"Why don't you ask Donigan?" The gun in Tull's fist never wavered. Maybe his big time was over and he was ready to take to the hills again. If he went out of here, he would have to go through violence, and fast. Anticipation seemed to heat some gross pleasure in him. Vanity and liquor had taken the close guard off his tongue.

Sam worked on that. "I think you're a pretty big cog in Donigan's organization. We've heard some smart young buck's his right bower. That could be you. I think it is."

Tull said nothing, but the answer lifted in his eyes, a quick gleaming before the curtain was drawn. He seemed sure of his ability to leave when he chose. He seemed to crave the last drop of triumph in this.

"I've been hearing about you, Benton," Tull said. "Peaceful Sam, they call you around this camp. You're supposed to scare the daylight out of people. Well, you don't scare me. I've heard 'em saying that the man with the guts to plug you don't live. Sam Benton, you've been running a big bluff on this camp. They'll know it, before long."

There was the ghost of a smile on Sam's lips. "You believe that myth a little, or you wouldn't be trying to talk it out of your head."

Tull had a queer glint in his eyes. "What makes you so sure of yourself? You pack a fast sneak gun or something?"

"See? You've got ice in your guts. You've got a gun on me, and you're scared to squeeze it off. Scared I'll beat you with a trick shot, somehow. You're a

coward, or you wouldn't be such a show-off. Now you've tied yourself in a knot. You want to find out if you can kill me, but you can't pull the trigger because your finger's gone dead—"

Sam was not greatly surprised that Tull did not fire when he batted the gun out of his hand. It was swift, covered by Sam's easy, slow, almost hypnotic words. But it was not hypnotism, Sam knew—only cool moral courage asserting itself over truculent animal fear. Sam bent and picked up the gun, but did not use it to subdue Tull. He slid it under his belt, motioned toward the door, and followed Tull out.

Mary had put breakfast on the table while Sam stood lost in thought. Until the note had come from Donigan, just now, he had not realized the outlaw had learned what had happened to his man. It meant that Donigan was near, somewhere. And now he had Kip to force his will on the law.

Sam took seat at the table from habit, though he felt no hunger. He sipped strong black coffee and looked up when he felt Spence seeking his eyes.

"All right, Sam!" Spence said, a little tiredly now. "We don't know just where Donigan is, but Tull probably knows how to find him. If we turned him loose, we could trail the reptile. We'd have a show to take him over again, and Donigan to boot."

"I was elected to the law," Sam said, finally. "And the law doesn't trade with the likes of Donigan."

"But you're Kip's father!" Mary said, and her voice rose on a tearing note.

"Yes," Sam said, "I'm Kip's father."

"This camp is very fond of Kip! It would tell you to get him home safe at any cost!"

Again Sam struggled with words to tell them. Kip was one person. The law was for countless people, not only now but for countless days to come. The words

fell awkwardly to his tongue. "Tull's a killer. So's Donigan. If they get away with this, they'll be all the worse. If they get the law to budge one inch, there'll be no holding them."

Mary fell silent, eating nothing. Like Sam, Spence only sipped a little coffee. Sam rose presently and went to stand by the open kitchen door, staring into the yard, the strong wish for wisdom in him that was the only prayer he knew. He heard Mary clearing the table. He heard Spence moving. Then he heard his wife's quick, protesting voice: "Spence—don't—" Something hit him hard on the back of his head, and he was spilling to his knees and down. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Night Hunt

IT SEEMED to him that it took only seconds to fight it off, but when he opened his eyes he found himself flat on the floor, with Mary anxiously on her knees beside him.

"Spence!" he gasped. "Why did he do it?"

Mary swallowed. There were tears in her eyes, and the struggle for perspective. "He took your keys, Sam. He's gone to turn Tull loose. He hit you with a piece of wood. I didn't understand in time to stop him. You've got to believe me. I haven't your strength, but my heart is with you."

Sam shoved up, pushing off the thumping ache in his head. He said, "I know, Mary," and turned out through the door.

Though the hour was early, a few men were already on the streets, and Sam sensed excitement as they looked at him. He reached the small, log building that was the camp jail to find Dwight Burts waiting there. The cell door was unlocked, the cubicle empty.

Burts was judge of the miners' court

Sam had appointed to try Ossie Tull. His eyes now showed a mixture of sympathy and belligerence.

"You can't stop 'em, Sam. Spence cut out with Tull on horses five minutes ago."

Sam's broad shoulders were pulled up tightly, and he let them fall. Spence had rapped him a good one, and he had been out longer than he had supposed.

"And you approve?" he asked Burts.

"I sure do. Spence come to my place with that note Donigan sent you. I told him to go ahead. He showed it to Tull to put Donigan's authority behind what he was doing. Tull agreed to lead him to Donigan so the swap could be made for Kip."

"He'll never do it," Sam said. "You can't deal with Tull's breed. You can't deal with a man like Donigan."

Burts spread helpless hands. "What else could we do, Sam?"

But Sam Benton had heeled around and was heading for the livery. There he secured the big gelding he was accustomed to use when business took him into the hills. He had only despair in his heart at this turn of events, and his anger with Spence shook him. Plain logic showed there would be nothing to hold Ossie Tull to his bargain. Tull would be cunning enough to suspect a trap, a possibility Spence himself had mentioned.

Even now Sam wore no arms. The livery man told him that Spence and Tull had taken the trail up Althouse Creek. At the edge of camp, Sam picked up fresh tracks. The warm trail would not be hard to follow, but the men ahead were riding fast. Sam put his trust in the gelding. The country was so broken there was no point where he could see ahead. They had fifteen minutes' start on him, now. He might overtake them, if Donigan was not waiting too close.

Sign continued past the defile of Run Gulch, on past Snowshoe. It rose rapidly onto the toe of Johnson Point, then ab-

ruptly swung southeast into steeper mountains. There Sam Benton pulled down his horse in horror. A figure was sprawled limply across the trail ahead. He knew it was Spence even before he dismounted and turned him over. Shot through the chest.

In his mind's eye rose the ugly picture of Ossie Tull, apparently unarmed but armed with sly and vicious cunning; Spence, playing the man's game and outclassed in it. The evidence was all here, scuffed on the earth. There had been a quick struggle in the saddles, and they had hit the ground together. Somehow Tull had got the gun away from Spence. Now Spence was here alone, and his riderless horse had gone on up the creek. Tull had taken the light trace that led up the mountain, disencumbered of all responsibility in the sure pattern of his breed. Spence knew that pattern now.

There was a pulse. Some of the trembling left Sam as he found it. Spence's head was slack, and blood covered the front of his shirt. Sam took a handkerchief from his pocket and slid it under the shirt to press it against the wound. He removed his belt and cinched it outside the shirt and over the handkerchief to form a compress. Turning the unconscious man over, he placed Spence's handkerchief under the belt where the slug had torn through his back. Rising, he paused in hard study. He was only a couple of miles from camp. An hour to reach there and return, an hour's start for Tull. An hour in which their bargain about Kip might be kept in this fashion, somewhere ahead; an hour longer in which Ossie Tull could taste the relish of his triumph over the law.

Spence had brought this on himself through his own fundamental error in trusting the will of evil men. Sam placed him where a wide-skirted evergreen would shade him and where he would be noticed should anyone pass here.

The trail staired swiftly up the mountain. Logic warned Sam strongly that Donigan might be near, for this eminence was a good place to watch the country below. The gelding was slowed now, but he knew the horse had been likewise slowed. By minutes he lifted out of the stand of conifers into thick, low chaparral. There was a rise ahead that he knew was the summit. The lifting sun was in his eyes, now, already heating the frequent outcrops of granite. Ridged country, as he gained elevation, fell away at every hand. South not many miles was the California line and the wild country between the Klamath and Trinity, recently opened by gold seekers.

These were Jape Donigan's stamping grounds, an almost impregnable retreat. It seemed logical that they would head for there, perhaps taking Kip, perhaps leaving him, shucking off another responsibility. Sam Benton topped the rise, and in the next instant pitched from the saddle. The sharp crack of a gun ahead rang in his ears for an iota of time before unconsciousness completely engulfed him. . . .

Tull's name kept thumping on Sam's tongue when his senses returned. For a long moment he could not open his eyes but lay face down, feeling a thorough coldness rather than pain, saying the name over and over. Tull had had his try and failed. For a time this awareness filled Sam's mind. Tull could not shoot a man who looked at him unafraid. But he could pull trigger from cover, without warning, a swiftly stabbed shot before whirling his horse to flee.

Sam got his eyes open and lifted his head to drop it inertly. The cold in him grew bouyant, and he began to swim in it. For a time he thought he was swimming to Kip for some reason, with Kip getting farther and farther away. He saw Kip's face quite clearly, at times, finely cut like Mary's. Then abruptly his mind

steadied, and he pushed himself upward.

He came to his knees and paused, resting. The cold was all through him. He could move one leg, but the other dragged. It puzzled him, for there was blood in his eyes. With slow patience, he got to a sitting position. His right thigh was bloody, the pants leg punctured. There was a gash on the left side of his head. Patiently he rebuilt what had happened. The first shot had knocked him out of the saddle. Tull's second shot had hit him in the thigh, as he lay on the trail. Sam looked around with a sudden worry. His horse, like Spence's, was gone.

The cold began to leave, and in its place came a slow but clawing thirst. His only pain even yet was a dull ache. Presently he struggled to his feet and battled a swirling landscape. Vision steadied, and his heart sank when he saw that the sun was three hours higher than it had been.

He found he could walk by using his right leg like a stiff and senseless log. He went back to the rise, which was only a few lumbering steps, and scanned the swiftly dropping trail toward Browntown. For a moment he could see nothing but the wasteland, sun-splashed and breeze-rippled.

Then he saw the horse, possibly a half mile below, grazing at some distance to the right of the trail. His wounded leg buckled suddenly, spilling him to his knees. For a moment thirst crowded everything from his mind, but there was no water on this mountain. There was only a horse, which he needed. He sat down, getting his legs straightened before him. He removed his shirt and began to tear it to strips; he got a compress bandage on his leg, and turbaned an awkward bandage about his head. Shoving himself to his feet, he found he could walk, and he plodded down the trail toward the horse.

He did not know if he could catch it. It was still neck reined, a divided loyalty

between its rider and its stable seeming to have held it here grazing idly in the mountain grass. Sam went down the trail at a pivoting, half-sliding gait. It seemed to him that the numbed leg began to thaw a little under steady use, and was strangely without pain.

HE COULD NOT see the horse now, but he had its position stamped in his mind. He left the trail, awkwardly working his way up a sharp slope. He followed the neck of a gully through overhanging salal, coming slowly to the grassy open that stretched to his right. The big gelding below sensed him, lifting and turning its head. Sam held still, so as not to frighten it. He let it get used to the notion of his presence, then started on. The gelding stretched its neck, biting the tough grass with strong, snapping jaws. Abruptly it snorted and whirled.

Involuntarily, Sam called a gentling word, but the horse broke into a trot, cutting across the slope away from him. Sam paused, hoping it would halt, rebuking himself for his error. There was a downdraft here on the mountainside, which he had overlooked; he had let the animal scent his blood. It went into another stretch of chaparral at a fast trot.

Doggedly Sam moved across the open. If the horse halted, he would try to swing around and come up on the lee. It might work, though having been frightened, the animal would be leery. Then, far ahead of him, the gelding came out of the brush, climbing back toward the summit.

Sam slowly made his way to a position below it, then turned up. Climbing was far more difficult, but he kept at it. Then, the horse halted and swung its head, but it looked the other way. It was nearly at the summit now, nearly a quarter mile north of the trail. Sam stalked forward, fearing some awkward movement would startle it into motion again. He measured

each step carefully with his eye, and lifted himself its length.

He could only stare slack-jawed when the horse abruptly broke to its right in a bolting trot, slanting across the slope for the now distant trail. Sam could see the trail in a considerable sweep from this elevation. The gelding disappeared into the brush, later to re-emerge and keep going down the trail to camp, to its stable.

Then a choking sensation hit Sam. A group of riders cut into view down there. The gelding, recognizing its kind in their mounts, proceeded though swerving out. A rider cut out, leaning in the saddle to catch its reins and pull it down. Sam was waving his arms and yelling to attract their attention, but he realized the distance was too great. He saw them huddle there a moment, then the rider who had caught the gelding slapped its rump, sending it on down the trail.

The riders came on, lifting their horses again to a fast walk up the grade. Sam cut out then, hoping to cut them off and doubting his ability. Panic took him, and he tried to run, only to stumble and fall flat. He lost sight of the party as brush cut it off after he had shoved up and swung patiently on. His bad leg was downhill now, the good one taking most of the work. He moved with all the speed at his command. He called frequently, but knew he was too far away.

Then he reached the trail and halted. The scuffling of many hoofs showed plainly that the party had passed. He could see to the summit from here, and the space between was empty.

HE TRUDGED on to the summit and paused to sweep the space below with hungry eyes. The land fell away more steeply on this side, within a mile dropping into the gorge of curving upper Althouse Creek. As he moved downward, he put the situation musingly

through his mind. He began to see what had happened. Many miners passed back and forth in the gulches, far below. Somebody had discovered Spence, unconscious or dead, there where the trail left the creek.

When Spence had been taken to the mining camp, it had raised an alarm, indicating the deadliness of the situation into which Sam Benton, with seeming insanity, had gone alone and unarmed. The last shred of faith they might have had in Sam's ways had been torn then. A definite and strong pursuit had been organized to take the trail openly. It put cold fear in Sam.

Then they had encountered the riderless gelding, just now, and put their own construction on it. This had hurried them past the very man it was their intention to help.

Sam made good time on the down grade, steady motion having taken the stiffness from his injured leg. At the foot of the grade the trail skirted a loop of the creek. Sam reached it and pushed off from the trail gratefully to drink. He bathed his hot, dusty and blood-smeared face and naked upper body. The cleanness seemed to augment his strength.

Resting a moment, his glance fell upon a track on the creek bank, other than his own. He stared at it in mounting excitement when he noted its size. Kip's! It was fresh, and it could be nobody else's. For a moment this tangible trace of his son rocked him. The Browntown riders had not paused here, but had hurried on along the trace. Sam shoved to his feet. He followed Kip's tracks and came to the place where Donigan must have camped. There were the remains of a fire, and many more tracks—some led out to the trail and returned, showing how Donigan must have waited impatiently for his threat to work and bring him Ossie Tull.

Patiently Sam studied the pattern made by these many imprints. Donigan had

known the general route Tull would take if released, and had waited to intercept him. With Kip. Tull, arriving, had given the alarm, and all had hurried on. Also with Kip. Probably to use him as hostage until they felt no further need of him.

Donigan had had an extra horse when he picked Kip up. He must have brought it on some other plan, deducing from Tull's failure to return that he had got into trouble. He must have eschewed the trace for the creek in the interest of safety, and so had come upon Kip, fishing, below. He must have led Kip into revealing the story and his own identity; it would not be hard, for Kip was proud of his father. So the perfect plan had tumbled into Jape Donigan's lap.

But Kip was mounted, which meant they would not have to discard him because he was a handicap. Sam Benton was deeply grateful for this small relief, and he went on.

Yet worry began to mount as thought continued. The trio in flight could not be far ahead of the Browntown pursuit. The latter now was doubtless making the long gamble that Donigan could be frightened into dropping Kip behind to satisfy them. But there was revenge in Donigan, as well as fear. There was malice and spite and unyielding hatred of all who hunted him. Sam regretted that those who were trying to help him had taken the action. Afoot, limping and nearly spent, he would be far behind when the last step came.

He trudged stolidly along the freshly hoofed trail that now followed the creek between rearing walls. He could only keep going, and even this elemental task required his fullest concentration. He grew aware that the light in this gorge was softening steadily. He had forgotten time, and it reached him as a shock that it must be getting on to late into the afternoon. The wild, tumbling creek was petering out, and he knew he was climbing

to its headwaters. Then he was at the end of the gorge, where the trace jumped up roughly, rising a thousand feet in three-quarters of a mile.

He drank once more at the creek, then studied the climb. He had been this far only once before, hunting deer with Spence. He recalled another trace that ran along the ridge top, far above, curving due north in one direction and south in the other. This would be the trail, worn by game and Indians and a few white feet, that would put Donigan and Tull into the same, rugged wastes of northern California. Sam Benton began the grueling climb.

He lost awareness as the minutes passed, seeing only this length and distance, and putting himself stubbornly to it. The trace hairpinned, back and forth, so that the space he must cover was many times his progress. He was conscious at times of sweat streaming from him; again he would think of the dwindling day. He was scarcely aware of it when he came over the top onto a fairly wide and level ridge.

He stayed there, satisfying himself that the south trail was tracked, as he had anticipated. He tried to make a calculation of how far ahead of him they would be now, and failed. He could see clearly in every direction, except the one ahead. There reared the blunt lift of Grizzly Peak. At no great distance, but he would have to reach it and make that climb also before he could see ahead. He started on.

PRESENTLY he thought that he had gone a mile, and the peak was still ahead of him. A draining despair was sinking into him, with the recalled knowledge that yet higher, even wilder, land lay beyond. A mile was nothing against it. He could not argue the solid fact of this out of his mind. Presently he was aware that the trail was bending slow-

ly southeast. A wild hope lifted in him that it would skirt the peak, saving him weary, distant steps. He had been here, but he could not remember. He couldn't even think, any more. Then he was spilling down—

When he wakened it was to come instantly to his senses. He realized that it was well into the night, and all the upper wastes were bathed in strong moonlight. He shoved to his feet, surprised that he did it so easily. His body had compelled rest of him, and in return had renewed his strength. He started on, with only a little motion required to limber his stiff, sore leg. Then he paused as an odd thought struck him.

He swung himself to face his left and studied the country below. He did not know where the stray thought had come from, but in his mind suddenly was a clearly drawn map of the countryside, remembered, he supposed, from his hunting trip. But suddenly he knew what he would do, if he were Jape Donigan.

Some miles ahead, he recalled clearly, this trail neared the headwater of Tannen Creek and its sharp fall-away of land. He had followed a wounded buck down its length. After a couple of miles it conjoined with larger Sucker Creek and its wider, easier gorge, swinging northwest, doubling back, somewhere below there.

If he were Donigan, Sam thought, he would lead the Browntown party well past the Tannen Creek headwater, then foul trail and double back. Such a course would give him a longer but far safer way back to refuge. If he were Donigan, that was what he would do.

Decision came instantly, and he turned that way. The drop on this side was as steep and considerably longer than the slant he had climbed. Now he had the grueling process to reverse, every bit and then much more. His hope was a clutching sensation in his throat, little more than a solid bit of logic rising to his

mind that must have dropped him at this point to rest, to wait, and to realize.

Donigan, if he tried such a plan, would be in unbroken country and would make poor time. He would ride well past his backswing course. He would have to find means of fouling trail. Then back, slowly. It would be slow going until he had reached Sucker Creek.

Maybe he could intercept Donigan, and maybe not. Yet he had a better chance of that than of overtaking mounted men. There was heart in Sam Benton now, though his poorly lighted route was rough. He had developed a sense of terrain, and he picked his twisting way almost by instinct. A mile down, then another, and then on. He got down to the bottom of a gulch, south of the peak, and it was easier going. Abruptly he found himself on the downfalling creek he sought.

He drank here and paused, reaching for decision with only fragments of thought. Donigan in flight, meeting it with cunning, doubling back on his enemies. Tull, shaken and full of fear, crowding. Kip—Sam dared not think of his son. But he knew Donigan would not indulge Tull's taste for speed. There would be night and rough country, miles of it, and the need of caution.

Sam could find no tracks on either fairly open bank of the creek, but could not be certain in this light that they were not there. However, he knew there would be little use in continuing his stubborn foot chase down creek, if they had really passed. By turning up, there was the slim but solid hope that he might meet them. Again he keened his feeling and knew that his hunch pointed up creek. He headed that way.

So strong was the sense guiding him that he was not surprised when, some time later, he heard a slight, arresting sound ahead. He halted, feeling no urge to conceal himself, experiencing the sharp lift of elation. He decided it had been

the stirring of a horse not far above. Someone had paused above here to rest, and he knew with clear insight who it was.

As he studied the situation, a new worry began to assert itself, suddenly greater than his satisfaction. It was an abrupt awareness that the Browntown party might not have taken bait. Or not for long. Five good men, some of them doubtlessly along because they knew this country. They would hit a fouled trail. They would probe the situation. Some one of them might very well think of the thing that had struck Sam Benton. They might at least split and send part of the force down this way. Men with guns and savagery burning in them. Sam knew what Donigan and Tull would do, if they had to fight.

CHAPTER THREE

The Devil's Hideaway

THERE was a queerly contrasting serenity in the night, and Sam's attention was on it for a moment. Again he drew from it. Order. Law. The natural wildlings, even these enormous masses of inanimate matter, did not break it. But wildlings among men broke it, or tried to. The personal problems that had been Sam's fell away as he recalled he had been elected to man's interpretation of that law. He believed in his job. He believed the order it served was strong and good and prevailing. He went forward, openly.

Someone fired two quick, startled shots. Sam heard the bullets pass harmlessly to his right. They had not expected to be approached from this side, and the sound of his open motion had warned them.

He called, "Donigan! Tull! I'm coming in. I'm not armed."

He was not surprised that they let him come up, believing probably that he only

wanted to negotiate for Kip. Sam's eyes, as he trudged forward, hungrily sought the shape of his son. Elation swelled in him when Kip shoved up eagerly from the ground.

"Dad!"

"Hello, son. You all right?"

"Yes."

They had made a short, cold camp, Sam saw, at a point where rocks up creek gave them a natural fort against attack from the one logical direction. Kip had been stretched out in the shadows, and now he moved toward his father, his slender boyish shape good to Sam's eyes.

"Stay where you are, kid!" Donigan rapped out.

Sam had never seen the man, and now he studied a short, blocky figure, indistinct in the pale light. Donigan held a gun in his hand, as did Tull, who stood off to the left, near the creek. Sam knew that if he made a menacing move he would be dropped in his tracks.

"What do you want, Benton?"

"You're under arrest," Sam said. "You and Tull. For everything in the book."

"I'll be damned!" Donigan breathed.

"I tell you, the man ain't human!" Tull cut in, and his voice had the ragged edge of fear. "I plugged him twice, back there! He talked a gun right out of my fist when he locked me up. Drop him, Jape, before he starts in on you!"

Sam laughed softly. "So you're still scared. Something's making you admit you haven't really got any guts."

"You're a cool customer, Benton," Donigan said wonderingly.

Sam looked at him. Here he knew was courage of a sort, the kind that animals knew. So Donigan was less dangerous than Tull. Yet he dared not let either of them know he was less certain of himself in this situation than he had ever been before. But he was with Kip; no matter what happened, from here on, he would be with Kip.

There was one thing now. There was the law, and his responsibility to it was greater than that of a father. He could not beg for Kip and promise to throw pursuit off the trail, any more than he had been able to turn Tull loose in the first place. He wanted these ruthless, defiant men to have no feeling of victory over the society they trampled on.

Sam hated to believe the report his ears gave him, then. It tensed and turned them all. Far up the canyon, something was moving. Something alive. Something that all of them feared.

Donigan turned his face slowly back to Sam. "What you got up there, Benton?"

"I haven't got anything," Sam answered.

"Bah." Donigan was silent for an instant in reflection. "So you decided to sweep Sucker Creek. You with nothing but your fists. Mebbe you wouldn't even use them. Benton, head up the creek. Tell 'em you ain't seen nothing. Turn 'em back. I'll take your promise. I'll let you have your kid."

Sam Benton dragged in a slow breath, wanting desperately to agree. Whoever that was, the approach was going to start gunplay in a moment. Sam knew what would be the first happening in it. He didn't care so much about himself. But Kip, looking like Mary, whom Mary needed at least as much as she needed Sam Benton. A great weariness hit him as he recalled the decisions, the efforts.

He started to speak and halted. For words, not his own, rose out of things long remembered to arrest his tongue: *Take now thy son . . . thine only son, Isaac . . . whom thou lovest . . . and offer him. . .*

IT WAS a moment of terrible and imminent danger for all of them, created by nothing more than a sound. Sam felt its weight as the words came to him and pushed it slowly back.

"You haven't got a chance, Donigan. You can't beat it. The quicker you see that the better for you and everybody."

"I make my chances, Benton," Donigan rapped. "Take your kid and get going. They'll believe what you tell them. You just found the kid wandering loose. He can say he was only trying to get home. He don't know which way we headed. That's it. That'll work."

"It won't work," Sam said, calmly now. "You might as well forget that."

"You're wasting time, Jape!" Tull said sharply. "Benton ain't human! Plug him, and let's ride!" Fear was in Tull, gnawing and without surcease, now almost without hope.

"I'm handling this business!" Donigan snapped. "And I ain't running when I don't have to! If we run, they'll know which way. Unless Benton turns 'em back. Benton, there ain't much time."

Sound again. Up the canyon and closer. A dislodged rock, or something scraping on stone. They all heard it. Donigan swung himself swiftly, and his gun covered Tull.

"Drop the frogleg, Ossie! This is a case for nerves, which you ain't got! Snap your rattled shot, and you'll spoil our chances. Benton'll break. He likes his kid. He's going to break, in a minute."

"Benton!" Donigan said worriedly, "there ain't any more time!"

"We stay," Sam answered. "One way or another."

No more sound from above. They listened now and heard nothing but the silence that can carry more terror than tangible sound. A long moment passed, and they watched each other and keened the night intently.

A horse below them snorted in sudden fright. It was one of their mounts, and it wheeled noisily in a clump of brush.

He heard the sharp intake of Ossie Tull's breath. Then, off to the west there was the clear, unguarded racket of some-

thing moving hastily through the chaparral.

Tull stepped out, bent a little, shoving for the creek and the one direction that had been clear of sound. Donigan reached to restrain what would be wild, abandoned flight. Tull turned in total savagery. He fired full at Donigan. He whirled and plunged into the creek.

Sam stood dumbfounded, seeing Donigan still standing there.

"Benton!" Donigan gasped, "you're right! We all stay." He fired calmly, not at Sam or Kip, but at Ossie Tull. The fleeing man tensed in the center of the creek. He stumbled on to the far bank and sprawled. He tried to shove up, then slacked and was still.

Donigan looked at Sam, swaying. Sam thought that he grinned. The gun dropped, and Donigan fell.

"Browntown!" Sam called, then. "It's Benton! Come in!"

Again there was nothing but silence, but the terror had gone from it. It was the stillness of the wastelands, the breeze pressing gently down canyon, its stir in the trees. He remembered the horse's startled snort, the instant crash of brush off in the chaparral, and then he knew. It was the flight of some frightened animal, likely a bear. It had been upwind, moving down the canyon. Some sense, perhaps the low drone of their talk, had reached it finally and it had swung out to cut around them. It had crossed the wind to carry its scent to the horse. The horse had snorted, and the animal had fled.

The very simplicity of it went deep in Sam Benton. He grew aware that Kip had moved up beside him.

"You all right, dad?"

"Yes, son." Sam dragged in a deep breath, his last doubt gone, the worry about Spence in the back of his mind. "Everything's all right." He placed a hand gently on his son's shoulder.

Answers to Cattle Country Quiz

(Questions on page 67)



1. False. A rocking chair horse is a horse with a very easy gait.

2. To "rim fire" a horse means to place a burr under the saddle blanket so he will buck. Just a bit of cowpuncher humor!

3. A "knothead" is either a stupid horse or a dumb human being—depending on what or to whom the term is applied.

4. A "lass rope" is an ordinary rope of the sort used by cowpunchers.

5. True. "Hoolihanning" is the act of diving from a horse onto the horns of a steer, thus throwing the steer to the ground.

6. If your cowpuncher friend told you he was going to a "hoofshaper" you should know he was planning a visit to the blacksmith.

7. False. A "hoodlum wagon" is a bed wagon.

8. The term, "holler calf rope" means to give up or to surrender.

9. False. A "cloud hunter" is a horse which rears up on its hind feet and paws with its front feet—as if reaching for the clouds.

10. True. In the old West, "coasters" were a type of cattle from the Texas coast area.

11. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told you he was looking for a "coffin", you might surmise he was planning a long trip. "Coffin" is cowpuncher slang for "trunk," and although punchers as a group didn't use these items too frequently, one might occasionally.

12. "Coffee cooler" is a term used in reference to prospectors.

13. True. "Cat back" is a term used to refer to mild bucking.

14. A cowpuncher might "can" a cow—that is, tie a can around its neck—to keep it from climbing through fences.

15. If the ranch boss sent you out to bring in a "cactus boomer," you would, if you knew your stuff, return (somehow) with a wild brush cow.

16. True. A "buzz saw" is a spur having a rowel with a few very sharp points.

17. True. "Brasada" is a term used in reference to the brush country.

18. True. In cowpuncher slang, the term "brindle" means "to go."

19. True. A "blab board" is a weaning device.

20. "Blow pipe" is a Western slang term meaning "rifle."



Jordan used his gun to prod Jackson ahead of him. . . .

There're two ways to die, Jordan found . . . one is to believe your life is over—the other is to fight to the last bullet!

SAM JORDAN figured to stretch his legs after the arduous stage-coach ride. He stepped out the front door of the Silver Star hotel, nodded to the two old-timers who sat on the boardwalk, chairs tipped back against the frame front of the hotel. He glanced idly at a bow-legged cowboy steaming past and at the flannel-shirted, booted miners cutting across the rutted, dusty main street. From his point on the high boardwalk, Sam Jordan had a fair view of Crowder's Crossing.

Looking at the town, he remembered what the little ornery old prospector had told him on the stage ride in. The prospector had been making conversation.

Sam Jordan had been soaking up information.

He decided he agreed with most of what the desert rat had told him. Crowder's Crossing was a sink-hole of a town. Sprawled at the base of the hills which rose bluely in the twilight to the west, Crowder's Crossing had been blistered by the searing winds until the false-fronted and adobe buildings themselves seemed to have a hard-bitten look. Up in the hills were the mines. East and south was cattle country. Here the stage line and railroad fused, and north of the town were the vistas of shipping corrals. The corrals were empty now, but Jordan guessed the town must be a hot place for the devil

LAST CALL FOR GUNSMOKE

By **TALMAGE POWELL**

himself when the cattle drives came in and the miners came down out of the hills.

Jordan's feet made solid sounds as he moved down the boardwalk. It could be a pretty nice town, he reflected, with nothing more harmful happening to it than an occasional hoorahing. But there was one bad trouble with Crowder's Crossing. The name of the trouble was Doc Greer, a thief, a cheat, and a liar, the fire-eating sand-grubber had informed Sam Jordan. "If evil deeds and evil doers was flies," the snorting little prospector had added, "Doc Greer would be flypaper. He's a handsome devil, though, tall, full-chested, with a face showing a lot of bone and a mane of curly black hair. The winimin go for him, son. Like moths for a flame—and they usually get burnt. It ain't been so long ago that a woman killed herself over Doc Greer. Name of Rose Drake. She must have been a purty trick at one time. She never belonged in a gambling den like Doc Greer's Gold Nugget. But he treated her like dirt, and by the time she kilt herself, she wasn't much to look at any longer, washed out, kind of, and lost looking. Like she just couldn't stand living any longer. Some says that Doc Greer was finally kickin' her out. She had nothing left but the gutter—or death. She got boozed up strong, sat down on the edge of her bed, and put a gun in her

mouth. And then she pulled the trigger.

"Me, mister," the prospector had finished, "I'm just stopping in the Crossings long enough to get a grubstake together. Then I'm gettin' out where the air is clean. I can't stand the stench that Doc Greer puts over the town. Might I inquire what takes you to the Crossings?"

"You may," Jordan had said. "I'm going there to play a game of poker."

"Gambler, huh? Well, can't say as I rightly guessed that—though you got the hands for it. I'd of guessed you a drummer, maybe. 'Bout the age for that, and look quieter and like you been out of doors more than most gamblers. Mister, you sure you want to tangle with Doc Greer over a poker table?"

"His game is famous. I always hankered to sit in on a famous game."

Recalling his talk with the prospector, Jordan's face hardened. Normally, it was a face that inspired confidence in buttons and old ladies and enabled him to help young ladies across a muddy street without their suspecting hidden motives. But when Jordan's face was set in lines, it looked old, and it wasn't simply a kindly, homely face any longer. It was the face of a man who has seen many things and who is shocked at nothing . . .

Half a dozen doors down the boardwalk from the hotel, Jordan reached the

town marshal's office, and turned in. The office was dense with growing twilight. A man sat with his dusty, hard-worn boots reared on the desk. In the gloom, he was a gnarled, grizzled old man, rawboned and lean. His face was like leather, his eyes as cold as a hawk's.

"You're Hoss Jung?"

"I'm Marshal Jung."

"My name is Sam Jordan, Marshal. I wanted to ask you—"

"Jordan, huh?" The marshal swung his boots from the desk. He stood up, and looking at him, Jordan recalled a saying that no evil is deadlier than old evil. "I intended to look you up, Jordan."

"I'm right honored."

"You needn't be," there was quiet insult in Hoss Jung's voice. His gun hung low in a plain, black, oiled holster. Jordan wondered how many notches were on the gun. In the dusk he couldn't tell. "You been here less than six hours, Mister Jordan. Yet already you've told at least a dozen people that you plan to invade Doc Greer's big game. Word like that gets around mighty fast, mister."

"And Doc Greer don't like it?"

"I don't like it. I'm paid to keep the peace here."

"Whose peace? Greer's?"

"Mister," Jung's voice was so quiet it seemed to split in slivers and seep into the walls, "I expect a remark like that to be followed by an apology."

Jordan curled the corners of his mouth in a mirthless smile. He knew he had plunged in deep water. He knew this was Doc Greer's town and that Jung was Greer's man. Jung was like an old, evil varmint of the badlands, scarred by many battles, in whom mercy and compassion had curdled. Jordan had heard of Hoss Jung. Jung was as fast with a gun as Masterson or Earp back in Dodge. Jung was trying to needle him, and that told Jordan his life was in danger every mo-

ment he remained in Crowder's Crossing. He looked at Jung's lean-fingered hand hovering close to his holster, and wondered if he could out-draw this old man. It was but a passing thought. Jordan had come to the Crossings for a reason, and he decided he wouldn't be sidetracked.

He said, "An apology is an honorable thing—if there ain't dishonor in the occasion."

"Maybe you're just a tinhorn after all!"

"Then Greer will have no fear of me sitting in his game, will he?" Jordan moved toward the door. "But I didn't come in here to talk about that. I came to ask you where I might find a younker named Lonnie Jackson. He's the son of an old friend of mine, and his father asked me to pay respects."

"You'll likely find him over at the Gold Nugget," Jung said sourly. His voice caught Jordan again as the gambler moved out the door. "Tinhorn, while you're still in good fettle, somebody ought to tell you that the climate here is extremely unhealthy."

Jordan paused. "I've got an extremely strong constitution, Marshal." He left Jung standing in the gloom of his office like an old wildcat crouched in the depths of its den.

THE Gold Nugget was the biggest saloon in town. It stood midway down main street, presented a sun-baked face to the boardwalk. Sam Jordan pushed through the batwing doors. He stood a moment, letting impressions of the place make their way into his consciousness. Lamplight and lantern glow spilled over the Nugget from heavy brass fixtures overhead. The bar was to the right, polished mahogany. There were tables for monte, faro, roulette. Two or three games were going in desultory manner. It was too early in the evening yet for the Nugget to be really rolling. Jor-

dan decided it was a man's place, a place where men drank fairly good liquor and worked at gambling. There were no painted saloon girls in evidence and no stage for entertainment. The cowpoke with a mere month's pay could find his fun elsewhere. The Nugget was for the men with the big rolls, the men to whom a game is like wine.

Jordan was conscious of a pair of eyes focused on him from a poker table in the back corner. He let his gaze drift to the owner of the eyes. He knew this was Doc Greer. He looked at the dark, ruggedly handsome face, the curly, black hair spilling over the man's head. Greer looked young, and, in a way, boyish—but Jordan wasn't deceived. He remembered that Greer had killed seven men—and he recalled the girl, Rose Drake, who had killed herself because this devilishly handsome man had dragged her soul through the soil of hell.

Jordan let his gaze drift slowly away from Greer's. He walked over to the bar, bought a shot of whiskey. "The marshal told me I might find Lonnie Jackson in here."

"That's him at that table over there."

Jordan picked up his drink and walked to the table where Jackson sat alone. He'd had only a back view of Jackson from the doorway, and now, looking at the young man's face, Jordan felt a distinct shock. Lonnie was a too-thin, too-pale youth. He was drunk, sandy hair falling in his eyes, two tiny pools of saliva at the corners of his slack mouth. He looked weak and sniveling—but his eyes were tortured like a man hating himself, and Jordan felt heartened. As long as a person still felt a healthy kind of self-condemnation, there was still character.

Jordan sat down and Lonnie Jackson looked at him blankly.

"I don't guess you remember me, Lonnie. You were just a button last time I saw you."

"H-have a drink," Lonnie said. He swayed over the table, eyes bitter. "Have a dozen drinks, mister."

"Not mister, Lonnie, just plain Sam Jordan. I bumped into your pa on my way out here. We had a reunion, boy. When he learned I was coming to the Crossings, he asked me to look you up. A fine man, your pa."

Lonnie's mouth worked. "I rather not talk about pa."

A shadow loomed beside Jordan's elbow. "The kid said he wanted a drink."

Jordan looked up, into Doc Greer's dark, handsome face. Greer stood tall and lithe and deep-chested, like a beautiful stallion, but looking at the eyes, Jordan knew the stallion was a wild one, of the outlaw breed.

Greer said, "Lonnie, have a drink on the house."

"Most houses," Jordan said quietly, "won't serve a man when he's had more than enough already."

Lonnie started to rise. Jordan reached across the table and gripped the youth's hard, wiry wrist.

Greer pushed back his frock coat, planted knuckles on hips. Beneath the coat, Jordan could see the butt of a shoulder-holstered gun.

"It's been a long time since I saw you, Jordan. I hope you ain't aimin' to stay around town long."

"Hoss Jung has voiced the same sentiments already," Jordan said, getting to his feet. "But I aim to stay around until I've played poker with you."

Holding Lonnie by the arm, Jordan started out of the place.

He felt the flesh of his back crawling, expecting a bullet, as he led Lonnie across the saloon and out the batwing doors.

A few paces down the boardwalk, Lonnie pulled his arm from Jordan's grasp and stopped. Lonnie wasn't quite as drunk as Jordan had first thought him to be.

"Listen, I know when I want a drink!"

"Sure you do, Lonnie. So why don't you come up to my room to have it?" he inquired.

Lonnie hesitated for a moment wiped his hand across his lips, and said, "Well, no harm in having a drink with a friend of Pa's."

They went up to Jordan's room in the Silver Star. Lonnie sat down in the rocker when Jordan lighted the lamp with a sulphur match. Jordan had a bottle on the wash stand. There was only one glass in the room. He poured a small one for Lonnie in that, toasted with a motion of the bottle, and took his own straight from the bottle.

"Lonnie, your pa's bad worried about you."

"I hope you ain't goin' to try to preach to me, Jordan."

Jordan sighed through his teeth. "The old man knows things are not right with you, Lonnie. He can tell that from the letters he's had from you, asking for money. What's wrong, boy?"

He saw the bunching and releasing of Lonnie's jaw muscles. Lonnie looked at the glass he was gripping in his hands. "Nothing's wrong. If you see pa again, tell him—"

Jordan laid his hand on the youth's shoulder. "Boy, your pa and me rode some rough trails together back in the old days. I'd do anything I could for Harley Jackson—or his son. Sometimes a man needs a friend. Why don't you let me be your friend, Lonnie?"

He watched Lonnie's hands on the glass. He saw them tremble; he saw the inner struggle telegraphed in them. He saw them grip the glass hard. Lonnie stood up. "I'm obliged to a friend of pa's calling on me. Tell him I'm in good health and getting along all right if you see him again. Now I'm going back to the Nugget."

He watched Lonnie out the door, not trying to stop him.

JORDAN walked to the window, looking at the street below. From here he could see the Nugget. It was across the street, east a few doors. The saloon was filling. Any time now, Doc Greer's poker game would start. Jordan's eyes shimmered. He flicked back his coat, and the sleek Colt seemed to materialize in his hand from the shoulderholster. He checked the load of the gun, dropped it back into its cradle.

A knock sounded on the door, and Jordan crossed the room. He swung the door open to reveal a girl.

She was tall, and brought with her the strength and youth and sunshine of the great outdoors. She was dressed in riding clothes. She had a wholesome, lovely face framed in hair the color of honey.

"Mr. Jordan?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to see Lonnie. I was told that he came here from the Nugget with you."

"You heard right, ma'am. But he's already left here."

"Back to the Nugget?" the girl whispered. Tears seemed close to the surface.

"I'm afraid so."

The girl made a weary gesture with her hand, as if she had carried a heavy burden of worry and grief for many days. She turned to go. Jordan said, "You haven't told me who you are."

"I'm Trudy Mitchell, Mr. Jordan."

"I see. Lonnie used to write his pa that he was figuring to marry a girl by that name."

"Used to is right," the girl said heavily.

"Won't you come in for a minute? We can't talk here."

"Would talk do any good?"

"It might, Miss Mitchell." Jordan's smile was infectious, warm, and assuring.

She entered the room, regarding him narrowly. "What's your interest in Lonnie, Mister Jordan?"

"As much as any unrelated man can

have, I figure. Lonnie's pa is closer to me than a brother. We shashayed together when we were fire-eating youngers, when this country was a lot wilder than it is now."

"Was it ever any wilder?" she asked with quiet bitterness. Then she looked up at him, and said, "I'm sorry. I interrupted, didn't I? Lonnie's pa, you were speaking of."

"He saved my life once, Miss Mitchell. When a man does that, you feel either one of two things—you begin a little at a time to hate him because you owe him so much, or you feel that anything that happens to him happens to you too. His pain is your pain. Well, I've never come close to hating Harley Jackson.

"He settled down years ago, but I kept rolling. I saw him a time or two after his marriage, but we had kind of got to living in worlds apart. The last time I saw him was on my way out here. I found an old, broken man, Trudy, so crippled with rheumatism he can no longer ride, worried sick about the son who struck out on his own.

"I won't try to tell you how my heart bled for Harley Jackson. But you're the kind who can guess, ain't you? Now you know how I feel about Lonnie's pa. It's your turn to talk."

Her gaze had been fastened on Jordan's face the whole time he spoke. Now she looked away from him, and talked with her back to him. Her words came quietly at first, restrained, as if she were aware that he was, after all, a stranger. But the pressure of her own words wore the dam down. She had been holding the words in a long time. Now that she could speak, Jordan guessed that the words couldn't be held back.

"He's got a foolishness," she said. "Lonnie is good, except for that. He can't leave cards alone. When he first fell in with Doc Greer I hoped it was just a normal liking for poker. But it

wasn't. It might have been, if it hadn't been for Greer. Greer worked on him, prodded him, challenged him, egged him on. Lonnie had made a little strike in the gold fields. Greer wanted his money, and Lonnie seemed to go crazy."

Jordan realized the girl was crying, bitterly. Lonnie had gone broke. He had borrowed, written his father for money. She had tried to stop him, but he was in too deep, or thought so. He had to recoup, he had told her, make one killing pot, and when he got even, he promised to quit.

"But he'll never get even!" Trudy added.

"No, they never do," Jordan said, "but they're always dead sure they will. I've never seen it fail."

The girl said, with quiet desperation, "And they'll go to any lengths in that belief, won't they?"

"What has he done?"

The girl sank in the rocker and cried softly in her hands, as if she were sorry she had made a slip. "I can't stand it any longer! I've got to tell somebody! Who can I tell? Who besides you is there?"

"Then tell me."

She told the story haltingly. Lonnie had exhausted every resource. Two nights ago, a man named Olaf Gunnerson, a wealthy cattleman, had been in the Crossings, carrying a roll of nearly two thousand dollars. As Gunnerson returned late to his hotel, a masked man had stepped from an alley, invited Gunnerson into the alley at the point of a gun. Gunnerson, a good and kindly man, had been relieved of his money.

"And you think Lonnie did it, Miss Trudy?"

"The hold-up man was about Lonnie's build, according to Gunnerson's description."

"There are several men of about his build," Jordan reminded.

"I know. I've tried to tell myself that. But Lonnie left town until this afternoon. He came by the school where I teach and said he had been trying to make a business deal with a miner back in the hills. In his conversation he asked me if Gunnerson was still in the Crossings. When I said that I'd heard that Gunnerson had gone back to his ranch, Lonnie seemed relieved. He tried to hide it, but it was in his manner—he had been hiding until Gunnerson got out of town!" She drew in a long, shaking breath. "If Lonnie gambles tonight, that will prove it—at least to me. No matter what kind of story he tells others, I know that he had no place to raise any money in quantity. If he sits in Doc Greer's poker game tonight, it will have to be with Olaf Gunnerson's cash!"

HALF an hour later, Sam Jordan walked into the Nugget. He had left the girl on the boardwalk before his hotel. She had wanted it that way.

Now as he stepped in the Nugget, her words were still in his mind. *If Lonnie gambles tonight, it will prove it.* Jordan's eyes swept the place. The saloon had a fair-sized crowd. Gaming tables were running. Four men were playing poker at the table back in the corner. One of them was Lonnie Jackson.

Jordan's face tightened. He had come to Crowder's Crossing for a purpose of his own. He didn't know whether he would have the time or energy to do anything for Lonnie too.

Jordan threaded his way toward the poker table. He saw Hoss Jung watching him from the end of the bar. The gnarled, evil old man's eyes were taking on a glitter. He tossed off a drink, and turned his back to the bar, hooking his heel in the brass rail, watching Jordan's progress.

A pair of men that Jordan tabbed as tinhorns spotted him and drifted toward

the poker table. Jordan felt surrounded. Or like he had his head in a sack. He was aware of the beads of sweat on his upper lip.

Doc Greer was dealing when Jordan's shadow fell over the table. Greer had seen him enter, but Greer didn't look up now.

"It's a closed game, Jordan," Greer said.

"You always liked to run closed games, didn't you, Greer?" He let each word fall with a distinctness of its own. "If this game is crooked, I can understand your not wanting a man in it who could spot that fact."

Greer's hands froze in mid-deal. Jordan's voice had penetrated. A hush fell over the Nugget.

Greer looked up slowly, his eyes poison with hate on Jordan's face. He said thickly, "Sit down, tinhorn. You're in!"

In the first few hands, Jordan sized up the men ringed about the table. Greer played poker with a certain dash that belied his cold-bloodedness. He was playing honest, depending on his utter lack of mercy to win. Young Lonnie Jackson was playing with frantic desperation, a man who had to win. But the desperation wasn't of the reckless sort, Jordan realized, and Lonnie was staying just better than even. To Jordan's left sat a man they called Mullins. Jordan gathered that he was a mine owner. Mullins was a beefy man with a piece of right ear missing. He seemed phlegmatic. He gave his game away by unconscious grunts. Within three hands Jordan could spot Mullin's draw by the way he grunted when he picked up the cards. At Jordan's right was a slender man with the soft voice of a southern aristocrat. He seemed to play for amusement only. After a few hands he sensed the undercurrent of tension. He cashed his chips and pulled out.

Quiet crept over the Nugget. It wasn't a big game, as yet, but men sensed that Greer and Jordan were playing something

more than poker. Jordan was conscious of the pulse in his temples. He kept Hoss Jung tagged from the corner of his eye.

Jordan shook back his sleeves and dealt. The game moved on. Smoke from cheroots spiraled and filled the Nugget with heavy layers. Jordan played methodically. He was after Greer, and the whole of the Nugget knew it. He cared nothing for how much Lonnie Jackson or Mullins won. But he backed Greer into corner after corner, and the chips before Jordan mounted.

He watched the slickness come over Greer's face. He felt the knots tying tighter in his stomach as he realized Greer's nerves were wearing thin. The moment was approaching.

Greer slammed back his chair. He was white about the cheekbones. He looked at the deck in Jordan's hand.

"Sit down, Mister Greer. I haven't dealt to Mister Mullins yet."

Greer's lips trembled in rage. "You'll never deal another card in this game, Jordan. You cheat!"

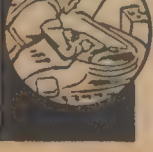
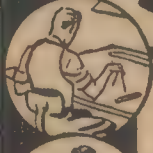
It was so quiet Jordan could hear soft breathing of Mullins beside him. Jordan let the deck fall to the table, stood up. "You've made your charge, Greer—now stand behind it!"

Like a vase breaking, the scene in the Nugget came apart as men spilled for cover. It was all like a slowed-down nightmare to Jordan's senses. He saw Greer in movement. Greer's face was livid with an insanity that only one thing could arrest. He saw Hoss Jung moving at the bar. He was aware of moving himself. He spun, dropped, and Jung's first shot missed him.

Jordan knew he couldn't ignore the death that was Jung. He fired, and he knew the slug caught Jung and saw that Jung was crumpling at the knees.

Greer's face was a sudden mask of crim-

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

son. He stood like that with every eye in the Nugget on him. It was a sight they wouldn't forget for a long time. Then Greer's body made a hollow thump in the silence as he pitched to the floor.

Jordan didn't realize how far he had moved. Now he felt the weight of the wall against his back. He looked at the phlegmatic Mullins. "He was wrong. I didn't cheat. But he was the kind of man who would cheat himself if given opportunity, and I let him think I had opportunity, and then let him jump to the conclusions that were natural for him. To make him do what he just did. It was the one way I could prod him into facing me in a fair fight—through his game. You can believe me."

Jordan and Lonnie moved along the wall together. They backed through the door, moved off down the sidewalk.

They started on down the street. Jordan looked carefully and picked his place well. Then as they stepped off the boardwalk, crossing an alley, Jordan put his gun in Lonnie's ribs.

"Step back in here a minute with me, son."

"Why—why the gun?"

"Lonnie, a few nights ago you robbed a man named Olaf Gunnerson of two thousand dollars."

"That's crazy! Why would I—I didn't—"

Jordan slapped him.

Lonnie reeled back under the blow. Then with a curse he recoiled at Jordan.

For a moment, Lonnie almost smothered the gambler with the hurt and bitterness of his attack. He was all fists and knees. But Jordan was heavier, wiser in battle, with greater endurance.

Jordan was sick inside. But he did what he believed he had to do. He punished Lonnie horribly with his fists, until he had beaten the bloody young man to his knees.

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Lonnie slumped back against the wall of the building, gasping. Jordan felt no sense of victory. He felt like dust inside. He said, "You stole the money, didn't you, Lonnie?"

"Yes," Lonnie gasped.

"Tomorrow you're taking it back. You're walking up and facing Gunner-son. You've got enough to repay him—I saw you'd have that in the poker game."

Lonnie said nothing. There was only the harsh, whistling sound of his breathing in the alley.

Jordan walked out of the dark alley. It was all over. He felt a terrific tiredness, a deep let-down. Tonight he had killed a man he hated and beaten the son of a man he loved.

He saw the girl as he turned on the boardwalk. "Miss Trudy!"

"I heard the gunfire in the Nugget," the girl said. "I knew Lonnie was in there. I came running. I saw you turning in the alley with him."

"Then you know what I just did to Lonnie?"

"No, I knew what you were trying to do. I think you've succeeded. I think Lonnie will be different once he faces up to Gunnerson."

"I'm grateful you understand me," Jordan told her.

"Mister Jordan, would you tell me why you came here? It wasn't primarily because of Lonnie, was it?"

"No, it was because of Greer—and a woman named Rose Drake. She was once called Rose Drake Jordan. She was my wife," Jordan said.

He walked slowly to the hotel. The girl's words stayed in his mind. By the time he reached the Silver Star, his step was growing buoyant. The girl had given him truth. And Jordan found himself looking forward to tomorrow, because, somehow, he was beginning to believe in it.



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 66)

Gresham's was the only weapon which
fired was wrong. He had felt the recoil
of his own six against the heel of his hand.
He had seen a great blow destroy half of
Ike Gresham's face and fling the man hard
into the dust. He had seen smoke at the
muzzle of Bert Maguire's weapon. Gres-
ham's men had burst from Dawson's
store, but Dawson was close behind them
with a rifle and neither got far into the
street. Powder from the muzzle of Clint
Barney's weapon had stung Gill's cheek
in passing and one of the trio in the street
had spun around and pitched on his face.
The remaining two shot their hands high
and a townsman came running to scoop
up the weapons they had dropped.

An instant, and the firing of one gun—
this was only his impression.

Fred Gill, with a gimpy leg of his own
now, limped painfully over beside Bert
Maguire and gripped the old man's arm.
"Thanks, Bert," he said quietly.

Clint Barney had pulled a thick manila
envelope from the pocket of his hunting
jacket. He shook a great handful of bills
from it and waved them in the air.

"Somebody get into the Trail and tell
Sammy to break out a fresh keg of his best
liquor. I'm going to buy Redhill all the
whiskey it can hold."

A townsman nervously caught Barney's
arm.

"Put some of that away, Clint," he cau-
tioned. "You don't want to throw it all
in the ditch!"

"Where in hell do you think it would
have gone," Barney snapped, "if Fred
Gill and Maguire hadn't walked out when
they did? Right where the first thousand
I paid those sons went! For the first time
in three months I can do what I damned
please, and I'm going to buy whiskey!"

"Make the first two rye, neat and
double, Clint," Fred said, stepping over
onto the walk. "Bert and me need 'em!"

TRIGGER TIME

(Continued from page 77)

bronze sun emerged from the mists, triumphant.

"I'll watch them." She moved behind her husband and her eyes froze on Eversole's face, awesome with appeal.

He shook his head. He told her, in that moment of silence, that he was sorry.

John Calmer swung around. "'Nother drink, sarge? I expect you'll want to be on your way."

"There's no rush. I've about finished."

"Got all your evidence?" His right hand slid to his belt.

"All I need." Eversole took a step backward. He didn't like in-play; it made for powder burns. And this man was a flip-shot, a fancy hand on the draw. Eversole would drop him when the gun was in the air.

Ellen lighted the kitchen lamp and blew out the match.

Calmer told her, "Get the twins in, Ellen." He dropped his eyes. "There'll be no moon tonight, so we can expect visitors."

"Trigger time?" Eversole asked.

"That's right." He was tall in the wavering light of the lamp, and his shadow plastered the wall. "It's when a man shows his hand, Sergeant."

"I'd like to see it."

Calmer's face wrinkled in a lip-tight grin. "Maybe you will—Ellen, call the twins. I'm going to look at the stock."

"I'll go with you," Eversole announced. They went out the kitchen door and squashed across the rain-soaked ground, boots sucking. Halfway to the corrals, Eversole asked, "Do you want to come, or shall I take you, Coughlin?"

They walked past the barn and approached the farthest corral. "I've been thinking about it. I was going to blast you, back there in the kitchen. But I've been thinking about it." He unlatched a wire gate and they stepped inside. "I

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

could've got you any time. I had a gun on you under the lunch table. But if I did that they'd send another man and then another one.

"So I guess I'll come." He inspected his stock, raising hooves, rubbing hides. "Damned ticks are all over the place, these days—Sergeant, would it change the whole course of Mackenzie's life if I spent one more night here? In the morning, we'll go."

"If you're still here."

"I'll be here—where do you think I can go?" He held out his hands. He was tree-shaped in the twilight, a sweating shape with a voice like gravel. "And call me Calmer, at least 'til we leave. That's the kids' name, you know."

"All right, Calmer. I think even Mackenzie would give you one more night."

Calmer chuckled. He seemed relieved, now that the thing was in the open.

"He's a bachelor. He wouldn't understand." They went through the barn to the other corral.

"I think he would." Eversole helped with the feed. They hauled water and filled the tubs and belled one steer in each corral. They tested the wire fencing, fingers inquisitive in the dark. When they had finished, a scattering of stars lay tossed across the top of the night.

Calmer led the way on toward the glowing lights of the house, voluntarily walking ahead of his silent keeper. In the kitchen he said, "Let's play with that bottle. I don't guess there's much of it in the guardhouse."

They had a drink. Ellen came downstairs. The twins were in bed, she said.

Calmer smiled. "I'd like to look at them, later." He said it simply, said it evenly, and she knew.

She sat down, her face tired all of a sudden.

Eversole took another drink. This was worse than he'd thought it would be.

TRIGGER TIME

A man, now, a man you could punch, or shoot, or just sit down and talk with. But a woman—she slipped through your fingers like smoke and became something all alone, on the world but not of it. You couldn't handle a woman; she handled you.

Calmer felt it. He was gruff when he spoke, trying to sound as if he still had control of things. "A small drink, honey?" He'd never called her that before.

She looked up. She tried to smile as she answered, "All right." She rose and crossed the room and found her yarn basket. "Your scarf is almost finished, John. I want you to take it with you."

He mixed her drink with water and put it next to her. She didn't touch it; she was busy with the needles. He thought, *I'll never take it off.*

Calmer was thinking of escape, as he had been thinking of it all afternoon. But there couldn't be any escape, he realized that. Every trail he took would be a blind alley; and sooner or later a man would ride up to him, and show a paper, and reach for his gun.

Ellen bit yarn and knotted a loose end and held the scarf up to the light. She nodded, satisfied.

Eversole tried to think of the most incongruous thing he could say, anything to jar the silence. He said, "I'll burn a steak for you."

Ellen looked up, a set smile on her mouth. "John burns them beautifully. Let him try. You can undercook the potatoes, Sergeant."

Calmer stood up. "I guess we're all hungry, and don't know it."

The ghost of the thing was leaving the room, fading away from their shoulders, talked into nothingness. It would be back, it would fill the house as long as John Calmer wasn't there; but for these last few hours it would be ignored.

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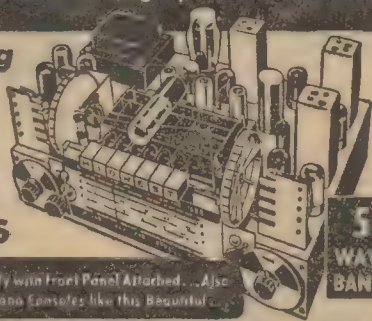
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

Eversole made a cigarette after he put the water on; Calmer massaged the steaks with a raw onion. They poured a drink apiece and tasted them gingerly, not wanting to be too fast; wanting to have the liquor there, available. John Calmer waited till the water was boiling and the potatoes were in before he put the steaks on the fire.

"Timing," he said. "Everything is timing."

He watched the potatoes bobbing in the bubbling water; he saw the gun on Calmer's hip, naked to the cylinder, high in the holster. He was considering taking it when he heard the bell.

Calmer heard it and turned to the window, onion peelings dripping from his hands. He tilted his head.

Calmer slung the peelings aside and yanked open the door and dove through it with Eversole at his heels. They sprang through the darkness toward the corrals, guns out, hammers cocked. They ran low, bent from the waist, heads forward. The steers were streaming out through a break in the wire, humping fast, herded by soft-speaking riders.

There were five of them, and the nearest one whirled in the saddle and rapped off three shots. Eversole sensed the ear-searing pass of the bullets. Calmer's gun exploded and the man who had fired first folded backward and hung off the saddle, arms down, one boot caught in a stirrup.

The other four were circling around the herd, keeping it between them and its owner. Each snapped off one shot, firing through the horns. Eversole tried to aim but the stamping steers swayed past in heavy-hoofed indecision. He saw Calmer flip his gun, fancy-like, and fire from the short ribs.

Calmer rasped, "This way!" and ducked gopher-like along the fringes of the swinging herd and scrambled up the fencing and flipped his gun and cracked

TRIGGER TIME

off two shots. One of the retreating riders fired back, and Calmer blew his fifth shot and the man jerked forward and slid from sight. Then Calmer was aiming carefully, arm out and slightly bent, the way they teach you on the range.

But the last two horsemen were galloping hard up the star-dim prairie, flat on their horses' necks, spurs working. Calmer tossed his gun and caught it and fired his sixth shot and jumped off the fencing. "That was just for the hell of it." He shoved the revolver at Eversole, butt first. "Here it is, sarge, empty and dirty."

Eversole shook his head. He pointed to the slowly straying steers bulging in the darkness. "Let's run 'em back. They'll be in Mexico by morning."

At the house, Calmer handed over his gun again, and this time Eversole took it. He stuck it in his belt, barrel down, and nodded. "That's Ordnance property."

Calmer said, "I won't need it any longer, that's sure." He gazed sadly at the burned steaks. He sighed.

"No," Eversole said. "You won't. I expect it'll be safe around here after tonight."

Eversole helped himself to a drink. One for the trail. "You won't have to send them away—Calmer. These valleys'll be settled, and you'll have your church, and you'll have your school." He regarded his empty glass, forehead furrowed. He had seen a man show his hand, he had made his final decision. Results were the only things he judged men by. "Calmer—get my horse for me, will you? I like to ride alone at night. I can think better."

Ellen Calmer's eyes were full of him. He had never seen a woman look at him that way before. He went through the motions of rolling a cigarette, but the tobacco spilled and the paper split and he threw it away. The clock ticked leisurely, as if it had all the time in the world;

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

ticked loudly in their ears, marking the minutes before John Calmer would return and resume his proper station as master of something clean and unafraid and quite unhaunted.

He returned with the horse and stood uncertainly in the night-shade of the cottonwoods. He kneaded his left shoulder, head to one side, face frowning.

"Sarge—I just happened to think: there's a sheriff's reward on those people under the tarp."

Eversole mounted lightly and moved Calmer's service weapon to a more comfortable angle. "Take it and build a school." He took off his hat to Ellen Calmer.

She bunched the tips of her fingers to her mouth and threw them out to him. Then she was beside his saddle, brown eyes lifted to his. She pushed something into his hands—the scarf. "It gets cold at night, sometimes, when a man rides alone."

He held the scarf dumbly, throat thick with words, salty with pain.

John Calmer came up beside her. "Come on back, when you can. Next time, I won't burn the steak."

They shook hands. Eversole wound the scarf around his neck and knotted it. "Wait'll Mackenzie sees this. I'll tell him the sheriff gave it to me." He lengthened stirrup; it would be a long ride and he wanted his legs easy. "Which reminds me, Calmer—why don't you run for that somewhat sullied office?"

John Calmer scratched his cheek and said, "Come to think of it, I might."

Eversole rode alone up the trail, oil-skin roll snug behind the cantle, neck warm to the feel of new yarn. He felt complete and very contented. The books balanced; they were closed. He followed the valleys away from Uinta, the last spot on earth to look for a man, and the likeliest spot to find him.



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